



**Community Service Society of New York  
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President and CEO**

**Testimony to the Assembly Committee on Education  
May 19, 2010**

As President of the Community Service Society of New York, I am concerned that far too many individuals are without a high school or equivalent diploma. In New York City, each year we leave behind 40 percent of what is supposed to be the graduating senior class, adding tens of thousands of individuals to the pool of individuals without basic educational certification. In New York City, that number stands at 1.3 million – across the state, it is nearly double that figure.

Public policy debates about this issue tend to focus on fixing the schools, or investing more in early childhood education. Of course, we need to work in those areas, but what about the individuals we have already left behind? We must ensure they have a pathway to success – to help themselves and our economy. The test of General Educational Development (GED) represents that opportunity. What I find so uniquely inspiring about GED students is that they are there completely of their own volition, despite not having succeeded initially. They understand the realities of the workplace, and know that they will not be able to contribute without better skills, and a diploma that will allow them to get a better job and attend college.

And our State needs them, too. New York State makes great economic gains each time an individual gets their GED. Each individual that gets a GED represents a net fiscal benefit to New York State of \$280,000 in increased tax revenue and decreased benefits, transfers, and institutional costs, over their lifetime.

If we want our economy to grow, we should be investing in GED preparation and certification. Jobs for those with less than a high school diploma are disappearing; more than ever, basic skills are essential in the workplace, and to give individuals the chance to reap greater gains in college. 95 percent of colleges accept the GED diploma.

Last year, my organization published a report about the GED system, entitled *From Basic Skills to Better Futures*. The report sought to highlight the value of the GED; we provided considerable research and economic data describing how the GED generates economic dividends for New York. I have described some of those benefits already. We also sought to address the many misconceptions that unfairly stigmatize the diploma. I want to highlight that the GED passing score is normed nationally, so that 60 percent of graduating high school seniors cannot pass the exam. The GED is not merely a piece of paper; it represents the attainment of significant basic skills. Nor does the GED encourage leaving high school early; research has shown that simple sorting mechanisms, such as parental consent, and requiring younger students to wait a year before enrolling serve as buffers against “moral hazard.”

Finally, our report looked at the quality of the GED system. We find that GED service providers – community-based organizations, schools, libraries and community colleges – make herculean efforts to provide educational services where others have failed, despite being funded at one-tenth of what the school system was afforded (to be unsuccessful with those same students). The biggest thing standing in the way of New York’s performance is a lack of resources.

We made a series of recommendations for how to improve New York's systems of GED preparation and testing, including:

- Programs should be given the resources to connect participants to college and careers
- We should leverage a wide range of resources – education, workforce development, and TANF funds – into GED preparation
- We should invest in standards and professional development to build the strength of programs and teachers
- We should rationalize and significantly improve our dysfunctional and underfunded system of GED test administration

Our report goes into details about the way this should happen.

But unfortunately, New York State seem to be moving in the wrong direction. I want to bring your attention to two proposed budget cuts that threaten to further undermine our GED system:

- **\$1.15 million within the GED Testing Program.** NYSED has proposed a budget that would eliminate this amount of funding to external organizations that serve as GED test sites. This cut would significantly reduce the number of test seats offered in New York.
- **\$2.6 million to Adult Literacy Education.** This cut, from a previous budget of \$6.9 million, would drastically reduce the number of GED prep programs in community colleges and community-based organizations.

The cut to testing resources keeps me up at night. In our report, we showed that New York State was 50<sup>th</sup> out of the 50 states in terms of test passage rates. Sadly, it appears that the funding cut to testing may actually improve that ranking, by severely restricting access to the GED exam.

The answer to improving our test passage rates is to invest more in quality preparation and testing, not in only letting those who need the least help to pass the exam take it.

The cut to the ALE program represents a 37 percent reduction in programs at community-based organizations and community colleges, despite the fact that both of those sectors have extremely long waiting lists. In New York City, our data shows us that 72 percent of individuals in these programs are working full- or part-time. They are seeking programs that will help them advance, earn more, and contribute more. Are these the individuals that we want to disinvest in?

We are encouraged that State Ed is examining ways to improve GED testing and preparation over the long run, as some of their recent memos have discussed. But our first priority must be to hold GED testing and prep programs harmless in budget cuts.

Now is the time to invest more in GED preparation and testing. At the least, we should not be making cuts when we our GED performance leaves so much to be desired. Giving motivated individuals the opportunity to increase their skills, employability, and earnings, is a way to promote growth. We need hold GED preparation and testing programs harmless from budget cuts, and start thinking about the intellectual and financial resources we can bring to improve these systems.