

# Texas Has a GED Problem: Alternative Paths to High School Equivalency

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A high school diploma is a foundational step toward self-sufficiency and economic stability for all Texans. For those who are unable to complete their high school education, high school equivalency exams offer an alternative path to college and career.

The General Education Development® (GED) test, developed by the American Council on Education and administered by Pearson, is the most commonly known equivalency exam. It is one of three tests available to test high school equivalency, and the only one currently used in Texas.

Recent changes to the price, rigor, and format of the GED test led some states to re-evaluate which equivalency exam best meets their workforce and academic needs. That conversation is now moving to Texas. This policy brief covers concerns around the GED test changes, the need for high school equivalency in Texas, what alternatives are available, and recommendations to ensure that all Texans without a high school diploma have alternative pathways to living wage jobs and post-secondary education.

## Concerns raised by GED test changes

The standards movement in K-12 education has sought to ensure that all students graduate high school prepared to access either college or a career path. The makers of the GED test sought to do the same, and made changes to the GED test to reflect what is happening in high schools across the country. These changes include more difficult test content—especially in the math portion; making it computer based instead of pencil and paper; and an increase of about 70 percent in the cost to take the test.<sup>1</sup>

With the new iteration of the test being both more expensive than the previous version and more challenging, earning a high school equivalency is becoming out of reach for many low-income Texans.

Since the 2014 GED test changes, significantly fewer Texans are taking the test. The number of test-takers dropped 44.5 percent to 28,020 in 2014 from 50,476 in 2012.<sup>1ii</sup> Texas has seen a 0.25 percent annual decline in test-takers from 2002 to 2012. This extremely large drop in test-takers is in part due to the increased rigor of the exam. If test-takers struggle to pass the practice tests, there is little reason for them to pay the testing fees and move toward completing the GED test.

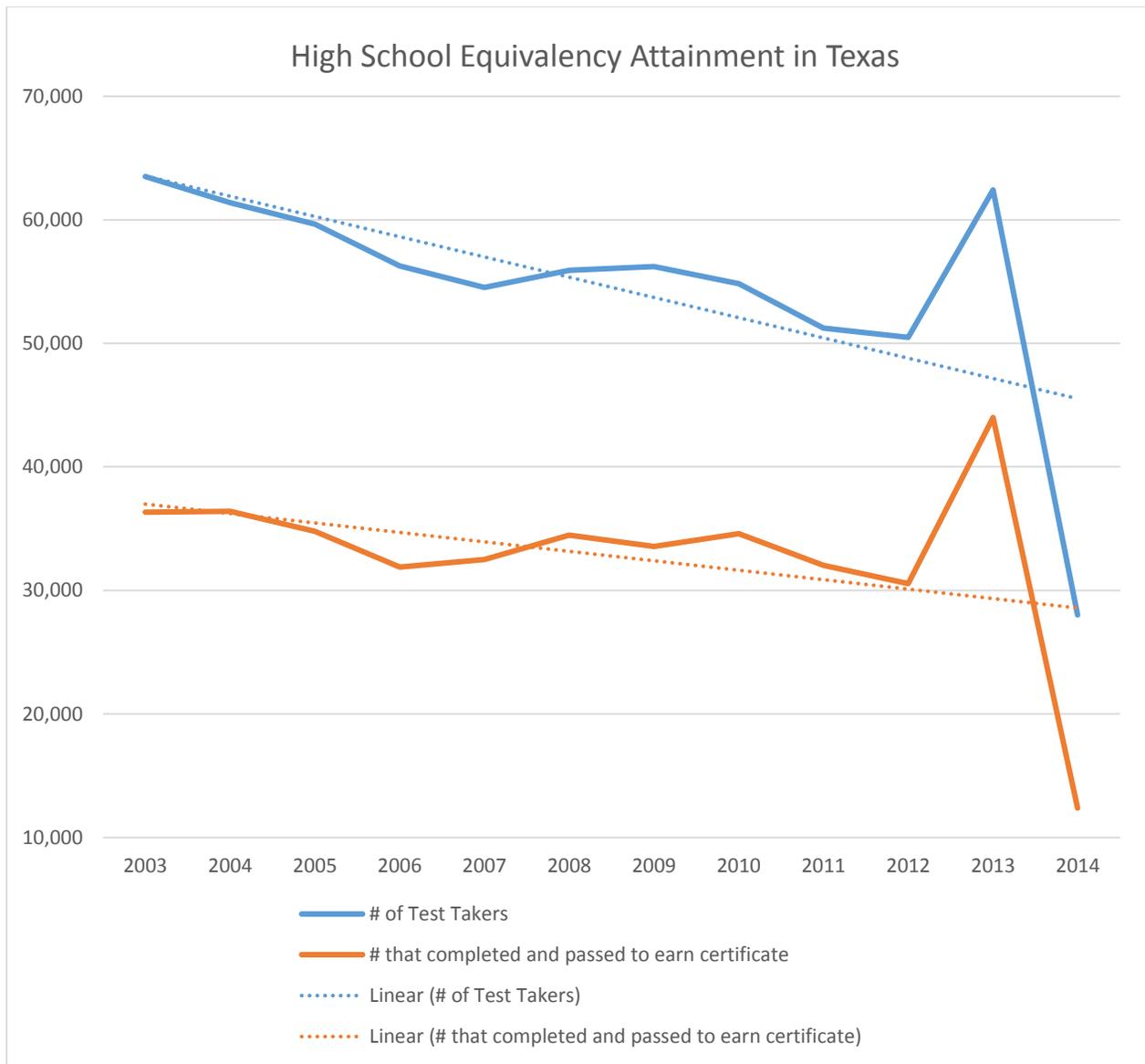
The number of Texans passing the test also declined after the changes. In 2012, 61 percent of all test-takers passed and received their Texas High School Equivalency Certificate. In 2014, after the release of the new version of the test, only 44 percent of all test-takers passed.

However, when you exclude paper-based test-takers (primarily only correctional facilities have a waiver for the continued use of paper-based tests), the pass rate in 2014 drops to only 30 percent.<sup>2</sup> This suggests that the computerized version of the test is a barrier to test-takers who lack computer literacy skills.

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<sup>1</sup> There was a spike in the number of test-takers in 2013, as adult learners rushed to complete the exam before the introduction of the new test in 2014. For this reason, 2012 is a more representative baseline.

<sup>2</sup> This analysis calculates pass-rates by comparing the total number of test-takers, those who took at least one part of the GED test, to those who passed. Texas should be held accountable for everyone who starts the process not just those who complete the tests.



Source: Texas Education Agency

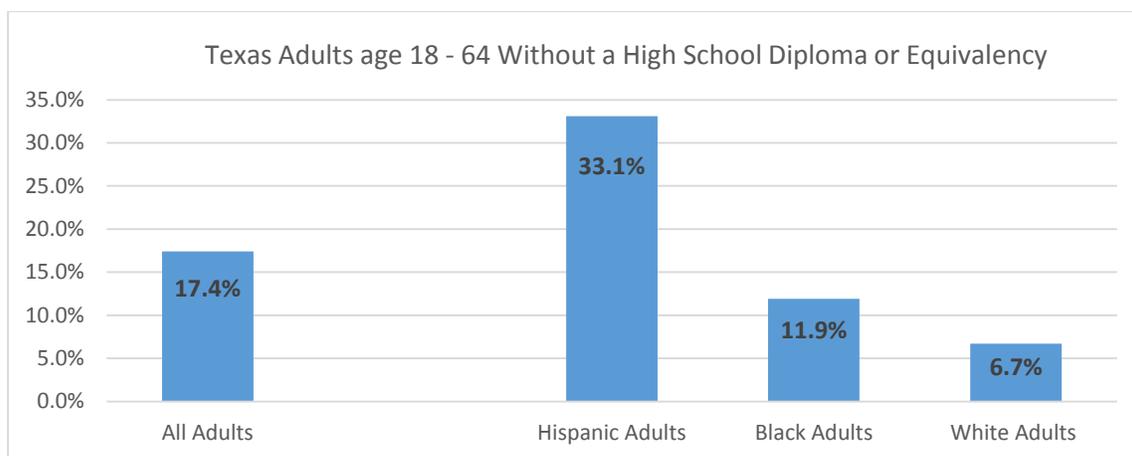
## Texas leads the nation in adults without a high school diploma

High school equivalency tests reduce barriers to the middle class by creating alternative pathways to higher education and living wage jobs that are often out of reach for those without a high school diploma.

These alternative pathways are especially important for Texas. Too many adults in Texas lack a high school diploma.

In 2012, Texas ranked 50<sup>th</sup> in the nation for its high rate of adults age 18 to 64 who lack a high school diploma or equivalent. Over 2.8 million Texans or 17.4 percent of the state’s residents lack this important credential,<sup>iii</sup> yet Texas only awards, on average, 32,000 Texas Certificates of High School Equivalency a year.<sup>iv</sup>

When broken down by race and ethnicity, the picture becomes even grimmer. Nearly two million Hispanic adults in Texas (33 percent) lack a high school diploma or equivalency. Hispanics are the fastest growing segment of the population and a large number are being locked out of career and academic advancement due to this missing credential.



Source: Working Poor Families Project

## Alternatives to the GED test

Texas has a stake in the success of test-takers and an important role to play in ensuring that high school equivalency exams remain within reach for test-takers both financially and academically.

Though the GED test is the most recognized high school equivalency exam, there are two alternative tests for states to choose from: the High School Equivalency Test (HiSET) administered by the Educational Testing Service; and the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC) administered by McGraw Hill.

Since each exam has its strengths and weaknesses, it is important to consider academic standards, test format, affordability, and employer confidence when exploring the best option for Texas.

### Academic Standards

All three tests increased their standards of academic rigor to match heightened expectations for traditional high school graduates. The new GED test has tiers of scores to reflect workforce or college readiness. However, academic institutions in Texas do not accept the GED test as a metric for college readiness.<sup>v</sup> The TASC content is aligned to Common Core State Standards (CCSS).<sup>vi</sup> The HiSET uses college and career standards developed by the Office of Vocational and Technical Education at the US Dept. of Education. An independent analysis of the HiSET by the University of Iowa found that the test aligns with the Texas College and Career Readiness Standards and the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills.<sup>vii</sup>

### Test Format

Computer literacy should not be a barrier to high school equivalency; especially if not all test-takers have access to a computer for practice exams. The GED test is the only test on the market that is exclusively computer-based and does not offer a pencil and paper option.

### Affordability

Unlike some other states, Texas does not currently subsidize high school equivalency exams. Test-takers bear the full burden of the cost. Due to the cost of subsidizing equivalency exams, the difference in test price has been the primary consideration in other states that have moved towards other high school equivalency exams. This is particularly important in states like New York that are legally obligated cover the full cost of the exam for test takers.<sup>viii</sup> The GED test costs \$135 for the whole test in Texas (\$120 for the tests and \$15 in state administrative fees); the HiSET costs \$50, and the TASC is \$67 (including state administrative fees).<sup>ix</sup>

## Employer Confidence

The most significant challenge to moving away from the GED test is the value of the name itself. Some states found that moving away from a test which is synonymous with high school equivalency is risky. Many employers, who are often familiar with the GED test, are unsure of the value of the alternative tests.<sup>x</sup>

However, in Texas students who take the GED test receive a Texas Certificate of High School Equivalency issued by the Texas Education Agency. The name of the test taken is not included on the certificate, though it included on the detailed transcript.<sup>xi</sup> Even with multiple tests, Texas could continue to issue the same certificate that would signal to employers that each test meets state standards.

## **Policy Recommendations**

In order to meet the needs of the most adult learners possible, Texas should have a variety of options available for test-takers. The Center for Public Policy Priorities recommends that Texas:

- Make all three high school equivalency exams available in order to provide choice and affordability to adult education service centers and test-takers;
- Take steps to educate employers and post-secondary education professionals about the Texas Certificates of High School Equivalency to ensure they know that the value of the certificate does not change even if the exams used to issue it do;
- Offer subsidies or vouchers especially for first time test-takers to increase affordability and to incentivize more people to take the tests;
- Develop a comprehensive strategy to address the unacceptably large number of Texas adults without a high school diploma or equivalency.

<b>Spotlight on Alternative Pathways to High School Equivalency</b>	
<b>New York</b>	Moved to the TASC after the GED test price increase and fully funds both the cost of the test and the adult education centers
<b>Illinois</b>	Makes all three tests available to test-takers
<b>California</b>	Makes all three tests available to test-takers
<b>Iowa</b>	Uses the HiSET exam
<b>Louisiana</b>	Uses the HiSET exam
<b>Missouri</b>	Uses the HiSET exam
<b>Nevada</b>	Uses both the HiSET and TASC exams
<b>Indiana</b>	Uses the TASC exam
<b>West Virginia</b>	Uses the TASC exam

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- <sup>i</sup> Auslen, Michael. *GED test going digital at nearly double the cost*. USA Today; July 24, 2013.
- <sup>ii</sup> Texas Education Agency. Public Information Request received May 1, 2015.
- <sup>iii</sup> Population Reference Bureau analysis of 2012 American Community Survey and Current Population Survey. Working Poor Families Project; 2014.
- <sup>iv</sup> Texas Education Agency. Public Information Request received May 1, 2015.
- <sup>v</sup> Texas Success Initiative (TSI) Assessment: Student Informative Brochure. College Board; 2014.  
<http://accuplacer.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/accuplacer-tsi-assessment-student-brochure.pdf>
- <sup>vi</sup> TASC Test Comparison. Test Assessing Secondary Completion; website accessed July 2015. <http://www.tasctest.com/the-tasc-test-comparison-for-educators.html>
- <sup>vii</sup> Presentation by Educational Testing Services representative on HISET at Texas State Board of Education; April 16, 2015.
- <sup>viii</sup> Fain, Paul. *Testy Battle Over Tests*. Inside Higher Ed; May 16, 2013.
- <sup>ix</sup> TASC Test Comparison. Test Assessing Secondary Completion; website accessed July 2015. <http://www.tasctest.com/the-tasc-test-comparison-for-educators.html> and GED Testing Service: 2014 Texas; website accessed July 2015.  
[http://www.gedtestingservice.com/testers/policy\\_tx#price](http://www.gedtestingservice.com/testers/policy_tx#price)
- <sup>x</sup> *Rocky first year for the new GED and other equivalency tests*. WHEC Rochester; April 1, 2015.
- <sup>xi</sup> Certificate of High School Equivalency Information. Texas Education Agency; website accessed July 2015. <http://tea.texas.gov/GED.html>

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