

2011

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## Recommended Citation

Quinn, Lois M. and Pawasarat, John, "Attempted Reform of the GED Credential in Wisconsin" (2011). *ETI Publications*. 21.  
[https://dc.uwm.edu/eti\\_pubs/21](https://dc.uwm.edu/eti_pubs/21)

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# **Attempted Reform of the GED Credential in Wisconsin**

by Lois M. Quinn and John Pawasarat, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee  
Employment and Training Institute, (© 1997, 2002, 2011)<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

Since World War II the GED test has been embraced by every state in the union as the primary tool for credentialing persons who have not completed high school. Most states have emphasized tougher standards for elementary and secondary education but have not recommended changes in the GED credential available to persons who do not complete high school. Wisconsin is an exception. In the late 1980s on the basis of increasing awards of GED credentials for high school-age dropouts, concerns that the 1978 version of the GED test was considerably easier to pass, and data showing poor performance of GED holders in post-secondary education, Wisconsin raised the requirements for GED credentials and banned GED testing for most high school-aged youth. This paper summarizes the research that led to GED policy changes and tracks the attempted reform of the GED credential in the 1980s, development of alternative instructional programs in the 1990s, and subsequent reestablishment of the GED in the state's high schools. The history sheds light on the role of the test publisher in promoting its product at the state level, the function of the GED in alleviating pressures imposed on local school districts by higher graduation requirements, and the competitive advantages of a nationally-known GED credential over harder-to-earn locally-developed alternatives.

The annual number of GED certificates awarded in Wisconsin was around 3,000 in 1973 when the state government simultaneously initiated two educational campaigns: one to upgrade academic requirements in high school and the other to expand GED testing throughout state. The

legislature adopted a series of thirteen statewide standards to improve elementary and secondary education, including requirements for at least 180 days of local school instruction each year; mandatory certification of public school teachers; and expanded programs for students with exceptional needs.<sup>2</sup> At the same time the state Department of Public Instruction (DPI) introduced a goal of locating a GED testing center within thirty miles of every resident and worked with the technical college system (then called the Vocational, Technical and Adult Education system) to establish GED test preparation centers in each of the state's sixteen VTAE districts. Within two years the number of GED testing centers in Wisconsin had risen from 29 to 55 and the number of residents obtaining GEDs had increased by 61 percent. Nearly half (46 percent) of those obtaining GEDs were teenagers.

When the Wisconsin legislature revisited the state education standards debate in the 1980s, then State Superintendent Herbert J. Grover introduced a series of initiatives to improve academic programs and high school completion rates. In 1985 he initiated legislation requiring/encouraging each school district to adopt minimum competency tests in the primary grades, middle school, and early high school. Local districts could use commercially prepared tests or develop their own exams to measure minimum standards of proficiency in reading, language arts and mathematics.<sup>3</sup> To qualify for graduation students were required to complete four years of high school English, three years of social studies, and two years each of math and science. The expectation that teenagers would benefit from more "seat-time" classroom work was implicit in a requirement that districts provide at least 1,137 hours of direct pupil instruction per year for middle and high school.<sup>4</sup> State legislation further mandated that each school district, no matter how small, make available (through coursework, independent study, or cooperative school arrangements) four years of high

school instruction in mathematics, science, foreign language, social studies, vocational education, English, art, music, and physical education. To improve preparation of Wisconsin students for the labor force, Grover developed a statewide "Education for Employment" initiative that required K-12 instruction in career choices, school-supervised work experience, work skills and attitudes, economics, and entrepreneurship education.<sup>5</sup> Finally, Grover introduced legislation offering state funds for special in-school programs to meet the needs of students considered "at risk" of not graduating from high school.<sup>6</sup> Of particular concern to Grover, a former local school district superintendent, as he implemented these reforms was the growing number of teenagers dropping out of high school and signing up for the GED test.

### **Background on the Employment and Training Institute GED Research**

In 1984 when Superintendent Grover contracted with the Employment and Training Institute (ETI) of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee to conduct a study of the GED, one GED credential was awarded in the state for every seven public high school diplomas. Baby boom demographics, introduction of the easier 1978 GED test version, and widespread use of the GED test for school-age "at-risk" students and dropouts had all contributed to the increase. Through Grover's efforts the ETI researchers were able to review the test scores of over 30,000 residents taking the GED tests at the Milwaukee center as well as application forms for all teens in the state applying for waivers to take the GED test before their classmates had graduated. Grover, an ex-officio member of the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents and the VTAE Board, helped secure college transcripts and summary grade records for all 2,900 GED holders enrolled at University of Wisconsin campuses from 1979 through mid-1985 and all 10,500 GED holders

enrolled at the Milwaukee Area Technical College from 1978 through 1984 (along with summary records for the 47,300 high school non-completers and 162,600 high school graduates also enrolled during that period).

The ETI analysis of state Department of Public Instruction GED application records found heavy use of the credential by school-age youth. From 1982 through 1984 GED credentials were issued to 4,800 Wisconsin school-age teenagers whose classmates were still completing their four years of high school. The problem was most severe at the Milwaukee GED testing site where 10,124 teenagers signed up for GED testing from 1972 through 1982, and 6,811 of these teens were issued GED credentials. In Milwaukee, three public schools were reserving two mornings **each week** at the local GED testing center for GED testing of their in-school youth.<sup>7</sup> The DPI records showed that Milwaukee, Wisconsin's largest city, had 7 percent of the state's public high school graduates, but showed 25 percent of the state's underage youth securing GED credentials.

Furthermore, the instructional time expended to aid teens in preparing for the GED test was extremely short for those who had performed poorly in high school. In the three Milwaukee Public Schools with GED programs, students who could not pass the district's minimum competency or who were credit deficient were expected to attend classes only half days and still usually took less than a year to prepare for the GED tests.<sup>8</sup> One alternative school in Milwaukee enrolling large numbers of underage youth was typically giving students less than a month's test-prep instruction before signing them up to take the test.<sup>9</sup> In Milwaukee's inner city the community action anti-poverty agency was using federal Job Training Partnership Act funds to help high school dropouts secure their GED after 6 to 8 weeks of GED test-prep summer programs.

On paper, Wisconsin's administrative rule establishing the minimum age for GED testing of young people in Wisconsin appeared quite restrictive. Seventeen-year-olds could only take the GED if they had a written request from an employer, postsecondary school official, vocational training director, or Armed Forces recruiting officer.<sup>10</sup> In practice, the state rule was ignored and school-age youth were permitted to take the GED test as long as they had their parent's approval and a signed permission from a local school official. The Employment and Training Institute review of the 4,800 forms for underage youth earning GED credentials found that **none** included the required documentation from an employer, post-secondary institution, Armed Forces official, or training school requesting that the youth be allowed to take the GED test. The most common reason listed by schools for allowing teens to take the test before their high school class had graduated was *"Student has completed GED preparation."* A sample of other reasons listed for underage youth included:

*"Student has only completed 1-1/2 credits toward graduation and has expressed no interest in returning to high school."*

*"\_\_\_ has not been successful in the traditional school setting even though he appears to have the mental ability. If he changed completely, it would take 1-1/2 years of concentrated effort to complete traditional high school requirements."*

*"\_\_\_ withdrew in March because he wouldn't graduate in June and he doesn't want to return to high school."*

*"\_\_\_'s attendance at a school with traditional setting has been erratic. His accomplishment level has been low. I feel the opportunity to obtain a GED certificate would be advantageous to him."*

*"Student has difficulty in finishing school due to moving from community to community."*

*"\_\_\_ feels her job opportunities will be enhanced by this action since she has terminated her enrollment in high school. I tend to agree with her thinking."*

*" \_\_\_ was forced to leave school last year because of a pregnancy. She has kept the baby but the home situation doesn't allow her to leave the baby while attending school. The GED would be of assistance to her at this time in her job search and part-time [technical college] training."*

During the peak of the baby boom, in 1978 when the number of Wisconsin high school dropouts reached 15,000, almost half (47 percent) of all GED credentials in Wisconsin were issued to youth aged 17 through 19. In subsequent years as the number of dropouts declined, so too did the proportion of teenagers among the population securing GED credentials. Teens, however, still comprised 36 percent of persons securing the GED credential in 1984, and underage youth (whose classmates were still enrolled in high school) made up 17 percent of the GED testing market. The majority of these underage youth were from urban areas where GED test preparation programs were most common.

At the time of the ETI study, the minimum score for passing the GED test in Wisconsin was 225, and half of the underage GED holders from Milwaukee earned total GED scores under 250. (GED scores ranged from 200 to 400.) Over half (55 percent) of these lower-scoring underage youth said their reason for taking the test was "further education" even though a 250 minimum GED score was required for admission to degree programs at Milwaukee Area Technical College and a 265 minimum score was required for admission to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Milwaukee teens were not unique in expecting their GED credential to open up college opportunities. From 1979 through 1985, two thirds (38,500) of the 58,000 individuals who passed their GED test in Wisconsin indicated that they took the test for further education. Consequently, a major portion of the Employment and Training Institute research focused on the post-secondary experience of GED holders in vocational programs at the community college located in Milwaukee

and in four-year colleges throughout the state. These findings further intensified Grover's resolve to move the GED credential out of high school and to foster alternative educational programs for dropouts.

- At the Milwaukee Area Technical College, the largest vocational school and community college in Wisconsin, students in one-year vocational diploma programs (such as practical nursing, auto servicing, welding, cosmetology, machine shop, and barbering) showed GED recipients with higher graduation rates (38 percent) than high school dropouts (31 percent) and lower rates than those of high school graduates (61 percent). In two-year Associate of Applied Science degree programs (e.g., accounting, the two-year college parallel program, business data processing, police science, management, and culinary arts) GED holders showed completion rates similar to those of high school non-completers (9 percent for GED holders, 10 percent for high school dropouts) and far lower than the rates for high school graduates (33 percent). A review of credits earned by those not graduating showed no significant differences between GED holders and high school dropouts.<sup>11</sup>
- The performance of all GED holders who enrolled at the University of Wisconsin's thirteen campuses showed only 4 percent earning college degrees after 5-1/2 years and 84 percent leaving before graduation. In each of the schools there were GED recipients who performed well; however, staying power and success in coursework were serious problems for GED recipients on all campuses. Of the GED holders who left college before graduation, 36 percent had earned no credits, and 85 percent did not reach their sophomore year. The problem of accumulating college credits was exacerbated for GED recipients who were required to enroll in remedial non-credit courses. Twenty-three percent of the GED



recipients were required to take remedial math courses before enrolling in college-level math courses, and only half of these students successfully completed their first remedial math course. Twenty percent were required to take remedial English courses before enrolling in college-level English courses for credit. While three-fourths of these students passed their first remedial English course, many of the students received failing grades in other college-level courses taken while they were enrolled in remedial English.<sup>12</sup>

- At the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee the school administration had available a retention study on new freshmen comparing the performance of 538 GED holders to that of 12,146 high school graduates first enrolled from 1978 – 1982. On measure of retention, grade point average, and credits earned, the GED holders as a group performed worse than high school graduates, including those from the lowest 20 percent of their high school class. After four semesters, only 31 percent of the GED recipients were still enrolled, compared with 62 percent of high school graduates from the upper half of their class and 41 percent of graduates from the lowest quintile of their class.
- Only at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where about 10 select GED holders were admitted annually (along with 4,500 high school graduates) did GED holders perform better than high school graduates from the lower half of their high school class.
- Two post-secondary institutions, Milwaukee Area Technical College and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, had reading score data available on applicants, including GED recipients, who were required to take the Nelson-Denny or Nelson Reading Test prior to their admission to post-secondary education programs. Of the GED population tested, 25 percent showed reading levels below 9th grade and 10 percent tested at 6th grade or below.

Nearly all of the GED holders with reading levels below the 9<sup>th</sup> grade level had received their credentials under the new GED test battery implemented in January 1978.<sup>13</sup>

In light of the ETI data on performance of GED holders in UW schools and increased coursework standards for high school graduates, the Board of Regents governing the University of Wisconsin System reexamined its admission policy for persons not completing a four-year high school program. In the past the Regents had required all high school graduates entering UW schools to show nine high school credits from the academic fields of English, speech, foreign language, natural science, social science, and mathematics (not including general mathematics), and a number of campuses had more demanding credit requirements. The Regents' prior policy had simply assumed that GED holders had attained the academic skills gained in these nine subjects. In 1986 when the Regents increased the number of high school credits required in specific academic courses to fourteen, they also developed a new policy allowing non-traditional students, including those who did not have a high school credential, to enroll only if the applicants showed evidence, other than passing the GED test, of their readiness for college (e.g., transcripts of course work completed in high school, high school rank-in-class before leaving, written recommendations, ACT/SAT scores). The Regents required that GED holders not normally be admitted to UW schools unless they are two or more years past their expected date of high school graduation.<sup>14</sup> After reviewing the ETI data on performance of GED holders at their campuses, a number of University of Wisconsin schools also increased their counseling and support services available to GED holders at their institutions.

## **Recommendations for Upgrading Wisconsin Equivalency Credentials**

Based on its research, the Employment and Training Institute recommended a series of policy changes to increase the standards for issuing GED credentials. These recommendations were designed to encourage youth to stay in high school, to increase the instructional time and content of GED test preparation programs, to ensure adequate career counseling regarding the limitations of the GED credential and alternatives to the GED, and to stimulate development of adult high schools in Wisconsin. Recommendations included:

1. Raise the minimum age for GED testing and award to persons 19 years old.
2. Require GED applicants to demonstrate 10th-grade reading and math levels prior to taking the GED test.
3. Until the GED tests are normed with Wisconsin's graduating seniors, raise standards to pass the GED to a minimum of 45 on each subtest and a total score of 250.
4. Develop "second chance" diploma programs for high school non-completers. These programs were expected to offer an academic, life skills, and remedial curriculum as well as occupational education, vocational education and support services related to the instructional program.<sup>15</sup>

In spring of 1986 Grover appointed a GED Work Group to review the GED studies and recommendations. The group included representatives from the VTAE system, University of Wisconsin, DPI, Department of Corrections, Milwaukee Area Technical College, alternative schools, Milwaukee Public Schools, and the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators. Grover asked the group to assess these findings and to

recommend changes in state administrative rules and department policies involving Wisconsin high school equivalency credentials. The task force unanimously recommended development of a new "second chance" diploma program for high school non-completers and supported raising the minimum age for taking the GED test to 18 years 6 months and after the teen's high school class had graduated. The requirement that GED applicants demonstrate 10th-grade reading and math levels was rejected, with strong opposition from GED instructors and administrators on the task force. An alternative proposal that GED applicants demonstrate at least 9th-grade reading levels was supported only by University of Wisconsin and Department of Corrections representatives. The task force supported the concept that GED applicants be counseled regarding the benefits and limitations of the GED certificate but opposed asking students to sign a "truth in testing" form outlining the GED's limitations. The group also opposed the recommendation to require GED applicants to complete a counseling program to define their career options and goals. Finally, the task force recommended that Wisconsin conduct a separate norming study to determine a passing GED score set at the 30th percentile for Wisconsin high school seniors.<sup>16</sup>

### **The American Council on Education's Response to the Wisconsin GED Study**

During the debate on GED policies, Douglas Whitney of the American Council on Education (ACE) prepared a detailed response to two of the Employment and Training Institute reports, which he forwarded to State Superintendent Grover and to GED examiners and instructors throughout Wisconsin.<sup>17</sup> Whitney criticized the lack of interpretive data in the University of Wisconsin report and the negative emphasis of the findings. He argued that at least half of GED

holders were prepared to undertake college-level work as evidenced by their first semester grade point averages of "C" or better and posited that the results for other GED holders were due to their status as older students who were married, had children, were employed, or had major financial obligations not affecting the high school graduate population. In his letter, Whitney criticized the measures of "success" used for the University of Wisconsin studies, arguing

[A] reader should consider whether lower retention rates, grade point averages, and number of credits earned are entirely appropriate criteria to evaluate the "success" of GED holders or other older students....a reader should ask, as the researchers did not, whether the institutional perspective is the only one from which the results should be interpreted. That is, while some (but not all) college officials might judge that relatively lower retention rates are undesirable, I suspect that many students (particularly older ones like the GED holders) might judge that their decision to leave the university represented a positive decision about their life and/or career. The researchers do not seem to consider that a decision to leave school may represent a "good" decision for the individual.<sup>18</sup>

Whitney also questioned the use of the Nelson-Denny Reading Test as a measure of students' ability to do college-level work. While acknowledging that some GED applicants to college were reading at the sixth-grade level, he argued,

While it may be surprising to some readers, and disappointing to many, the reason that some persons can pass the current GED Tests with Nelson-Denny reading levels as low as 6.0, is precisely that some persons are graduating from high school with comparable reading levels. In fact, for the two "at risk" groups reported by the researchers, the percentages of GED holders at the lower reading levels are rather similar to the percentages of high school graduates. Depending on the relationships between Nelson-Denny reading levels and various college "success" measures (as noted, reported by the researchers), it would be very appropriate for colleges to require a certain reading level (say 10.0) for admission to study -- but presumably the requirement would apply to high school diploma holders as well as GED holders, since the abilities of the populations are similar.<sup>19</sup>

He ascribed the lower reading scores of GED holders with credentials earned after 1977 to declines in the performance of high school seniors rather than production of an easier GED testing instrument.

Whitney opposed most of the recommendations for upgrading high school equivalency credentials in Wisconsin. He suggested that if the state wanted to eliminate GED classes in high school, they should just prohibit this practice rather than raising the age requirement for GED testing.

The GED Testing Service, it should be noted, neither advocates nor condemns the offering of GED classes in high schools; our policy, however, prohibits enrolled students from testing. What seems likely is that these classes were started for students who were clearly not going to meet high school graduation requirements, that they serve to keep these students in the schools rather than dropping out, and that eliminating the classes would not result in these students graduating.<sup>20</sup>

Whitney did not object to having GED candidates sign a form which included information about the GED test scores required for admission to Wisconsin colleges and universities, but he objected to the name "Truth in Testing Form" as a "deliberately emotion-laden phrase already adopted by persons interested in an entirely different issue (disclosure of test questions)."<sup>21</sup> He also did not directly oppose a proposal to offer career counseling prior to GED testing, but questioned whether this should be required of the "76-year old retired person who wishes to take the GED Tests for personal satisfaction," "an employed person who is taking the GED Tests in order to qualify for a promotion or for another job," or "for the 55% of the state's GED examinees who do not plan advanced study."<sup>22</sup> Whitney criticized the recommendation that Wisconsin develop a "second chance" diploma for high school non-completers, arguing that such programs could cost ten times more than GED classes. He estimated that only one to two thousand Wisconsin adults would be

interested in such classes and argued that they would "differ only in a few ways from the curriculum now in place for GED adult classes."<sup>23</sup> Finally, Whitney noted that ACE could conduct a special norming study of the upcoming 1988 GED tests if Wisconsin wanted to consider changing its minimum passing scores for the GED test.

### **The Wisconsin Norming Study**

In 1987 Grover contracted with ACE to conduct the norming study of Wisconsin high school seniors, and this study has provided a unique public look at the problems inherent in the GED norming process. A sample of 65 Wisconsin high schools was selected for the Spring 1987 Wisconsin norming study; only 50 of these schools agreed to participate, and replacement schools were not drawn for those declining to participate. In addition, although 1,112 students began the testing process, only 427 (38 percent) completed the entire GED test battery. Based on these test data, ACE reported that all but 19 percent of Wisconsin high school seniors could achieve a minimum score of 40 on each of the five subtests and a total score of at least 250 -- below the 30th percentile originally targeted but higher than the passing scores required in any other state.<sup>24</sup> Then in March 1988, after Wisconsin had implemented its new passing score standards, ACE notified the state that it had "made systematic errors in developing the conversion tables for all three forms of the U.S. English-language GED tests."<sup>25</sup> According to ACE's revised calculations, Wisconsin's score requirements (40 minimum on each test and 250 total) could be met by just 67 percent of Wisconsin seniors tested, not the 81 percent reported earlier by ACE.<sup>26</sup>

The American Council on Education conducted a second norming study for Wisconsin in 1993 using the same test instrument as in 1987. This study, which ACE maintained had a more

representative sampling group than its 1987 study, contacted 85 schools of which 39 actually participated. A total of 806 students began the testing, but only 657 (82 percent) finished the five-test battery. This survey reported that in 1993 only 52 percent of Wisconsin high school seniors could pass all five GED at the minimum scores of 40 on each subtest and a total of 250 or more.

The Council concluded:

[T]he 1987 norm group may have been a biased sample that was not representative of the State of Wisconsin. However, this finding could also indicate that the performance of graduating high school seniors in Wisconsin has changed since 1987.<sup>27</sup>

The Wisconsin norming studies provide a picture of the variability of the GED norming process and raise questions about the motivation for high school seniors to perform well on a 7-1/2 hour test battery that has no importance for their high school careers. One school participating in the 1993 norming study reported that many of the seniors tested resented being pulled from their scheduled classes and missing regular coursework during the two days of testing. Students complained throughout the testing period regarding the simple questions asked, and an advanced math student described the GED math subtest as demeaning. After the first morning of testing, two of the twenty students refused to return for the remainder of the tests even though the school staff offered food treats to encourage continued participation.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, after scoring the tests, ACE initiated the unusual procedure of eliminating all test scores which fell below the chance level, explaining:

When scoring the tests, all examinees who scored below the level expected by chance (i.e., the level expected by guessing) were eliminated from the analyses. This step was taken to remove potential deleterious effects resulting from students who may not have taken the examination seriously.<sup>29</sup>



## **Wisconsin Reforms**

Using results from the 1987 statewide norming study, Grover raised the minimum scores required for passing the GED test in Wisconsin. Ignoring Whitney's advice, he also promulgated new state administrative rules changing standards for issuing high school equivalency certificates and diplomas. The minimum age for persons taking the GED test was raised to 18-1/2 years or until a youth's high school class had graduated. The only exceptions were for 17-year-old youths who were incarcerated and youths who had been formally waived from attending school for at least one year or who were in a program approved by the state superintendent. For adults, those persons passing the GED test but not meeting additional requirements would be granted a certificate of General Educational Development. In order to earn a high school equivalency diploma, persons would be required to document four "seat-time" accomplishments in addition to passing the GED test. (1) They must successfully complete a course in health by earning 0.5 high school credits, completing at least 30 hours of instruction in an approved course taught by a teacher licensed by the state Department of Public Instruction or the state technical college board, or demonstrate competence by passing a DPI health test. (2) They must successfully complete a course in social studies by earning 3 high school credits, completing 30 hours of instruction in an approved course taught by a DPI or technical college licensed teacher, or demonstrate competence by passing a DPI social studies test. (3) They must provide written verification of attainment of employability skills (including skills in job seeking, applying for work, retaining a job, and self-development and awareness skills) from a high school, technical college district, community-based organization, college, university, licensed psychologist, or licensed school counselor. (4) They must complete

instruction in career awareness, including instruction in setting short-term and long-term career goals. (The last two requirements could be waived for persons over age 54.)

### **Development of Wisconsin Adult High Schools**

ACE initially discouraged the development of Wisconsin adult high school programs as an alternative for adults who were not completing the GED tests. Even after Grover introduced the adult high school option, ACE continued to urge local GED instructors to foster GED usage through marketing techniques rather than to address the curricular issues raised by the higher GED score requirements. In an October 1989 conference for adult educators, Wayne Patience of ACE's GED Testing Service offered his suggestions for increasing GED testing in Wisconsin:

Develop an identifiable logo and slogan. Pass a law declaring that the GED be honored as a high school diploma. Take advantage of the interest in dropout prevention. Be seen not as a branch but as an integral part of secondary education. Consider making the right to GED testing as an entitlement, just as is the right to graduating from high school. Eliminate all testing fees and make them the responsibility [of the] state . . . . Wisconsin could also present the GED as a dropout recovery service.<sup>30</sup>

Patience also reported his concern that fewer Wisconsin residents were taking the GED test:

The thing that most concerns me, when looking at the data from Wisconsin, is the catastrophic drop in participation. . . . We need to come to a clear explanation of what our service is and we need to overcome our reservations about the quality of our services. We must make sure we deliver service to those in need. Right now in Wisconsin we are meeting the need of less than one percent of the overall estimated one million individuals without a high school diploma."<sup>31</sup>

By contrast, DPI staff urged conference participants to develop curricula leading to a high school diploma in order to accommodate special populations who, for whatever reasons, were unable to achieve Wisconsin's GED passing score.

At the time of the GED reforms, very few options were available to dropouts who wanted to earn a high school credential. Only two institutions, the Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC) and Gateway Technical Institute, offered full high school programs.<sup>32</sup> To spur the development of other adult high schools in Wisconsin, Grover encouraged community college districts, universities, correctional institutions, and community-based organizations to submit innovative programs of instruction, which if approved could issue state high school equivalency diplomas. Most of the technical colleges developed such programs, often called "5.09 adult high school programs" after the section of the state administrative code authorizing their use.

The Blackhawk Technical College, for its part, identified competencies in the areas of mathematics, reading, science, social studies, English, health, civics, employability skills and career awareness. Unlike the GED test, this program had a clearly defined curriculum and focused on specific content areas. The social science curriculum included performance indicators for sociology, psychology, anthropology, economics, American government, history, world geography, and study skills. Indicators for economics, for example, included a mixture of memorization, applied knowledge, and experience-based learning (e.g., describe the concept of Gross National Product, define and describe at least two advertisement strategies used in a market economy, design and monitor a personal budget for a month). The college expanded other options available to "at-risk" teens and adults seeking a high school credential. In all, Blackhawk offered six possible credentials: an external diploma program, the GED high school equivalency certificate, the GED high school equivalency diploma program, a high school diploma gained by completing credit units required by the local high school district, a high school equivalency diploma granted after the student completed 24 post-secondary semester credits, and the 5.09 adult high school diploma.<sup>33</sup>

Milwaukee Area Technical College assembled a team of local educators, community representatives, university faculty, and school officials to create an adult competency-based high school diploma program. This program required students to complete a minimum of 44 learning activity packets in basic skills, study and learning techniques, and work life, home life, social, and employment skills. The team developed a variety of evaluation methods to document competence in each area.<sup>34</sup>

Many of the 5.09 programs were designed for immigrants with limited English proficiency as well as for persons with special needs who were not able to pass the GED tests.<sup>35</sup> The length of time required to complete 5.09 adult high school programs appeared to vary by district and individual, but most programs required at least 1-1/2 to 2 years to complete. These programs were usually developed at the local college level with substantial input from district teachers and considerable discussion regarding appropriate methods of assessment. Once the minimum passing GED test scores were lowered in Wisconsin, however, these programs received little use. According to DPI, in 2001 just 216 persons statewide earned state high school diplomas after completing 5.09 adult high school programs. Another 86 persons earned diplomas by completing one year of post-secondary education in a vocational area, gaining missing high school credits, or receiving recognition for a foreign diploma or degree.<sup>36</sup>

### **Dismantling the Higher GED Test Standards**

After implementation of Wisconsin's higher GED test score requirements and restriction of testing for school-age youth, the number of persons passing the GED test initially dropped from 8,468 in 1987 to 4,603 in 1988 and down to 2,660 in 1989.<sup>37</sup> The first GED reform that was

dismantled, and by Grover himself, was keeping the GED test out of high school. The DPI administrative rules promulgated by Grover in 1988 had prohibited teens under age 18-1/2 (or whose class had not graduated) from taking the GED test except in certain circumstances: 17-year-olds could take the test if they were incarcerated in correctional institutions, had been waived from school for at least one year, or were enrolled in an adult high school program approved by the state superintendent. Under pressure Grover rewrote the rules to allow 17-year-olds in technical college GED instructional programs to take four of the five GED subtests while enrolled in school. These youth were then permitted to take their fifth GED subtest three weeks before the end of the semester when they could legally leave high school (the end of the semester after their eighteenth birthday) or three weeks before the date of their high school classmates' graduation. As instructors adjusted to the new score requirements and more school-age youth studied for the GED, the number of GED credentials issued gradually increased to 4,725 in 1993.<sup>38</sup> Still, the total number of GED credentials issued was about half that before the changes.

ACE had predicted that if the Wisconsin GED passing scores were raised, students "would simply remain longer in instructional programs in order to try to pass at the higher score levels."<sup>39</sup> Local GED instructors were reporting, however, that many adults were unwilling to commit more than three to six months study time to GED instruction. For the math subtest instructors found that it was possible to increase GED scores if they taught introductory concepts of high school algebra and geometry in addition to drills on fractions, decimals, and percentages. Since three of the GED subtests (Interpreting Literature and the Arts, Social Studies, and Science), however, relied primarily on reading ability rather than mastery of specific course content, it proved difficult to develop instructional activities which would help raise test scores once students had been introduced

to the basic skills associated with each subtest (i.e., familiarity with the subject area, interpretation of graphs and tables, and experience completing multiple choice tests based on reading passages). In social studies, for example, extra months spent learning the core concepts of U.S. history, American government, geography, or economics would be unlikely to result in a higher GED score, since the social studies subtest did not require content knowledge of these subjects.

With Grover holding firm on the higher GED passing score requirements, a number of GED instructors and adult educators turned to state legislators in an attempt to bypass the authority of the state superintendent and to lower the GED test score requirements through state legislation. A Wisconsin Legislative Audit Bureau (LAB) paper reported that a number of the technical schools and community-based organizations favored offering GED credentials in order to open dropouts' access to employment even if the credentials did not actually measure equivalence to high school completion. The LAB bluntly articulated the debate:

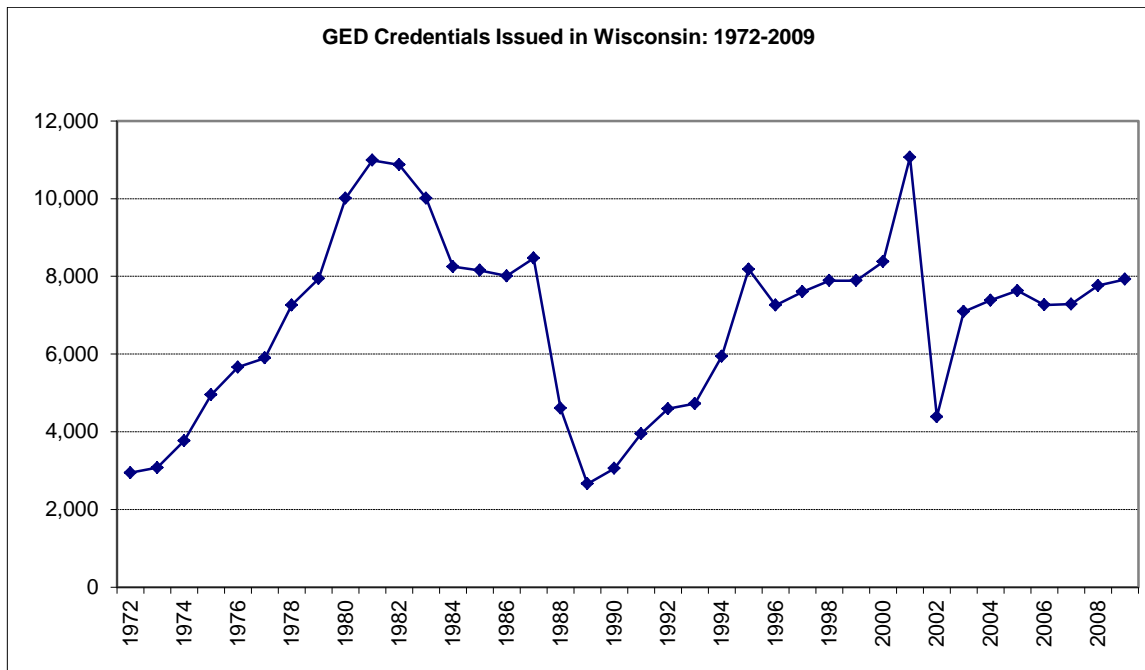
If the primary purpose of the GED diploma is to provide an academic credential which is equivalent to a high school diploma, the current score structure may be appropriate. However, if providing employment and educational opportunities is also a key objective of the GED diploma, it may be necessary to re-examine the score requirements to achieve balance between maintaining rigorous standards, to ensure those who attain the GED diploma have demonstrated adequate academic preparation, and assisting individuals in enhancing employment opportunities.<sup>40</sup>

The LAB explained the differences in expectations for the GED credential between the State Superintendent and many of the VTAE directors:

The Superintendent of Public Instruction does not believe GED score requirements should be lowered. The Superintendent believes that improving employment opportunities requires improving the skills of those who earn the diploma to enable them to function well in jobs they obtain. . . . The Superintendent continues to believe that minorities and older adults are capable of learning the required material and passing the examination.

. . . 12 of the 16 VTAE district directors told us they believe the GED score requirements should be lower. They believe the importance of making the GED diploma equivalent to a high school diploma must be balanced against the need to provide employment opportunities.<sup>41</sup>

The superintendent held firm in his insistence on higher GED standards, and legislation introduced to return Wisconsin's passing GED score to 225 was defeated. But after Grover left office, the newly elected Superintendent John Benson lowered the minimum passing score on each GED subtest from 45 to 40 and reduced the total score requirement from 250 to 230. In August 1994 Superintendent Benson encouraged all individuals who had failed the test in the past six years to return to their testing centers to see if they now qualified for a GED diploma under the lower passing scores. In making these changes Benson cited his belief that the 1987 GED norming study had been flawed and that GED holders from other states were taking jobs away from Wisconsin residents who were failing the test at the higher required score levels. Benson told the media: "I believe this score adjustment is just and equitable. And I believe it is the compassionate thing to do."<sup>42</sup> In the first year with the lower score requirements the number of persons passing the GED in Wisconsin jumped by 38 percent, to 8,184. In 2001, with candidates rushing to take the GED test before the ACE's new 2002 test series was introduced, the number of GED credentials rose to 11,065, an all-time high. Over a third of those receiving credentials that year were teenagers.<sup>43</sup>



### **Raising the Bar for High School Students**

While lowering the standards for securing a GED credential in Wisconsin, Benson continued to raise standards for the youth who remained in four-year Wisconsin high schools. In 1996 DPI, with support from the U.S. Department of Education, developed model standards for high school subject areas. In announcing these standards Superintendent Benson stated,

Everyone who has attended school has a notion of what a good education is and what today's students should be learning to be productive citizens and workers in the 21st century. By developing rigorous academic standards, we are giving schools and students a clear picture of what the public expects them to accomplish.<sup>44</sup>

Benson identified over 640 competencies that he expected high school seniors, but not GED holders, to meet in the areas of language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, foreign language, visual arts, music, dance, and theater. In social studies, for example, the Department proposed 57 competencies which students were expected to master by the end of twelfth grade. The standards for high school seniors in the Social Studies area of "Time, Continuity, and Change" included:



- demonstrate that historical interpretation is influenced by a person's background.
- describe significant historical periods and patterns of cultural change such as the rise of nation states and social, economic, and political revolutions.
- learn how to use a variety of sources and to check their credibility to interpret the past and to better understand current issues.
- investigate, interpret, and analyze multiple historical and contemporary viewpoints within and across cultures.
- apply theories and historical inquiry to decision making about the future such as citizenship responsibilities in the twenty-first century, the long-term possibility for peace in Eastern Europe, and the evolving role of China in a world economy.<sup>45</sup>

Rather than relying exclusively upon multiple choice tests to measure student proficiency in subject areas (as the GED test does), Benson identified a broad range of assessment tools for public school students.

When the GED Testing Service announced its 2002 GED test series, the Department of Public Instruction did not request a separate Wisconsin norming study, but adopted the scores recommended by the test publisher.<sup>46</sup> The DPI also embraced the GED Testing Service's so-called "GED Option" programs that allow high schools to place their students who are a year or more behind in their coursework in GED test-preparation classes. Under the so-called GEDO #2 contracts with 160 Wisconsin high schools, 17-year-old students who are a full year or more behind their classmates in credit attainment and reading on a ninth-grade level are allowed to reduce their compulsory school attendance to half-days (including "work experience" activities) while preparing for the GED exams. The GED Testing Service reported that the 3,620 high school students participating in Wisconsin's GEDO #2 programs in 2008-09 spent an average of 50 hours preparing for the GED tests. Yet, under directions from DPI: "Students who successfully complete GEDO #2 will be **entitled** to a traditional high school diploma issued by their school district and to participate in the **same** graduation ceremony as other high school graduates [emphasis added]."<sup>47</sup> As noted by

ACE's GED Testing Service, Wisconsin reports its GEDO #2 completers as "graduates" for the federal *No Child Left Behind* requirements.<sup>48</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The State of Wisconsin has a long history of reform efforts aimed at improving the achievement levels of high school graduates. These have included increases in the days and hours of school instruction, mandatory requirements for a full range of high school coursework in every school district of the state, and minimum credit standards for high school graduation. The state has promoted minimum competency tests at the district level and developed benchmark achievement tests that are administered statewide to students in the third, eighth and tenth grades. The reluctance of state officials to upgrade the high school "equivalency" credential to recognize these increased state standards for high school graduation has been demonstrated in this chapter.

Reform of the GED certificate in Wisconsin was spurred by several factors: high usage of the GED credential by school-age youth, the failure of the GED test to guarantee high school level reading scores, and the low completion rates of GED holders in college programs. The data collected by the Employment and Training Institute supported the decision by the U.S. Department of Defense to categorize the GED diploma as a second-tier high school credential. School-age youth who had failed their high school coursework or could not pass local district competency tests were securing GED credentials after only weeks of preparation. Performance of GED holders in post-secondary college and vocational programs lagged well behind that of high school graduates.

Yet, once the state reexamined the GED credential, few options were available for "reforming" the GED certificate. While ACE provides periodic reviews of the GED test based on

national changes in education, the GED test battery remains locked in the five-test formula introduced by progressive educators during World War II. States set the minimum age for youth to take the GED tests and can establish minimum passing scores – an approach that provides only a very crude calibration of the GED testing instrument to their own standards of education.

In his most important reform of the GED credential State Superintendent Herbert Grover moved the GED out of high school -- by prohibiting youth under age eighteen and a half (or whose high school class had not graduated) from taking the test. Using ACE's norming study, Grover raised the minimum score for passing the GED test in Wisconsin and attempted to upgrade GED requirements (by offering a GED "diploma" rather than "certificate") to persons who spent further time, albeit brief, in social studies, health, and career education classes. Just as he had supported local school district initiatives to develop special education programs for youth "at risk" of dropping out of high school, Grover encouraged community colleges, community-based organizations, and correctional institutions to develop adult high schools with innovative curricula and measurable standards for completion. These fledgling programs offered a possible long-range alternative to GED test instruction for both young people and adults. Yet, with short-term GED instruction now re-institutionalized at the high school level, the more time-consuming and staff-intensive options will likely remain underutilized.

The pressure for a GED credential (achievable through less than four years of completed high school coursework) remains strong in Wisconsin. After Grover raised minimum scores for passing the GED tests in 1988, many GED instructors lobbied the state legislature and then the new state superintendent to lower the passing scores rather than to encourage enrollment in alternative high school completion programs. They argued that the goal of opening up employment

opportunities for high school dropouts should take precedence over the goal of having a GED credential that was actually "equivalent" to high school completion. In 1994, when Grover's successor John Benson acceded to these requests and lowered the passing scores, he even promised to issue credentials retroactively to candidates who had failed the test under the Grover standards. Subsequent state superintendents have promoted in-school GED instruction and pushed school districts to label GED holders as their own high school graduates.

By the 2010-11 school year Wisconsin had come full circle in its treatment of the GED. It not only embraced the GED in high school but even required high schools to include GED holders in the formal end-of-the-year graduation ceremonies and encouraged school districts to mask their use of the GED tests (whether for granting the full credential or for awarding partial credits) from the military, *No Child Left Behind*, and others reviewing students' high school performance. Thus decades after Wisconsin first offered wartime GED certificates to its World War II veterans, the GED test remains firmly entrenched, largely unscathed by the continuing public clamor for better high schools.

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1 John Pawasarat is director and Lois Qunn a senior scientist with the Employment and Training Institute of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

2. Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. "Toward Excellence in Education." Bulletin No. 5493 (Madison, Wis.: author, 1975), 76-78.

3. Wisconsin. Statutes (1985), sec. 118.30(2)(a).

4. Herbert J. Grover, Wisconsin Educational Standards: A Blueprint for Excellence (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, revised and reprinted October 1987), 1.

5. Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. A Resource and Planning Guide to Education for Employment (Madison, Wis.: author, 1987).

6. Judith M. Rodenstein, "Children At Risk: A Resource and Planning Guide" (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, August 1990).

7. Marvin E. Ketterling, Chief Examiner, Milwaukee Area Technical College, to Harold Zirbel, Director of Career and Special Program Planning, Milwaukee Public Schools, 12 July 1985. Unless otherwise noted, copies of letters are on file with the author.

8. Dick Schowalter, quoted in Chris Foran, "GED a Hot Property; Helps Students Catch Up," Milwaukee Sentinel, 8 January 1985.

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9. Review of forms on file with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Madison, Wis.
  10. Wisconsin Administrative Code (October 1984), PI 5.
  11. John Pawasarat, Peter Reynolds, and Lois M. Quinn. Performance of GED Holders at Milwaukee Area Technical College: 1978-1985 (Milwaukee: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Employment and Training Institute, 1986).
  12. Lois M. Quinn. Performance of GED Holders Enrolled at the University of Wisconsin's Thirteen Campuses: 1979-1985 (Milwaukee: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Employment and Training Institute, 1986).
  13. At MATC all students were required to take reading tests prior to admission to certain health programs. Additionally, high school graduates with grade point averages below C and GED recipients with total scores below 250 (260 for certain health programs) were required to take reading tests in order to demonstrate their ability to handle specific post-secondary programs. Applicants to UW-Milwaukee were required to take a reading test if they had been out of school for several years, had GED scores below 265, or as a condition for acceptance to the Department of Educational Opportunity. Nelson-Denny reading scores were located for 560 GED recipients.
  14. Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. "Minutes of the Meeting of the Regent Study Group on the Future of the UW System," 9 May 1986, 14-15.
  15. The rationale for each recommendation is outlined in John Pawasarat and Lois M. Quinn. Research on the GED Credential and Its Use in Wisconsin (Milwaukee: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Employment and Training Institute, 1986).
  16. Henry Hendrickson to Herbert Grover et al., 5 August 1986.
  17. Douglas R. Whitney, Director, GED Testing Service of the American Council on Education, to Herbert J. Grover, State Superintendent, "Comments and Suggestions," 15 May 1986; Philip E. Lerman, Director, Employment and Training Institute, to Tim Quinn, Department of Public Instruction, 24 March 1987. ACE declined an invitation from the Department of Public Instruction in 1985 to participate in the Wisconsin GED studies or to support additional research studies on the post-secondary experience of GED holders in Wisconsin.
  18. Whitney to Grover, "Comments and Suggestions," 4.
  19. Ibid., 8.
  20. Ibid., 17.
  21. Ibid., 20.
  22. Ibid., 21.
  23. Ibid., 22.
  24. General Educational Development Testing Service, "Spring 1987 Standardization Project Papers" on file with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Madison, Wis.
  25. Doug Whitney, American Council on Education, to GED Examiners, 21 March 1988.
  26. GED Testing Service, "Wisconsin 1993 GED Norming Study Final Report" (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, December 1993).
  27. Ibid., 12.
  28. School staff noted that the GED Testing Service only measured students' ability to write a general essay, while the school district required its own high school graduates to demonstrate mastery of 57 specific writing competencies during their four years of regular English courses. Among these were formal expository essays, editorials, book reviews, observation reports, poetry, monologues, personal narratives, character profiles, memoranda, job resumes, and research reports. Competencies are extracted from the School District of Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin, "9-12 Language Arts Curriculum," 1994/1995.
  29. 1993 Wisconsin Norming Study, 5.
  30. "Notes from the October DPI/GED Conference," WAACE (Wisconsin Association for Adult and Continuing Education) Bulletin December 1989, 2.
  31. Ibid.
  32. Since 1932 MATC operated an adult high school that offers a full range of half-credit Carnegie unit courses needed for high school completion. Since 1968 Gateway offered coursework credits for 80 hours of instruction (rather than the Carnegie unit 180 hours) under a cooperative agreement with a local high school district which awards graduates a local "adult high school diploma." Robert W. Tarbell, A History of the Milwaukee Vocational

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- and Adult Schools: From 1912 to 1958 (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Vocational and Adult Schools Press, 1958); phone interview with Richard Lenz, Gateway Technical College, 4 November 1996.
33. Blackhawk Technical College, "Adult High School Completion Options: It's Never Too Late to Earn Your High School Diploma!" (Janesville, Wis.: author, undated).
  34. Milwaukee Area Technical College, "Adult Competency-Based High School Diploma Program. A Proposal by the Milwaukee Area Technical College in Partnership with the Community to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction Under PI 5.09 of the Wisconsin Administrative Code" (Milwaukee: author, October 1990).
  35. Phone interview with Cheryl Demers, Mid-State Technical College, 31 October 1996.
  36. Phone interview with Helen Rogers, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 6 November 1996.
  37. GED Testing Service. The 1989 Statistical Report (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1990), 27.
  38. GED Testing Service. Who Took the GED? GED 1993 Statistical Report (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1994), 24.
  39. Whitney to Grover, 20.
  40. Wisconsin Legislative Audit Bureau, An Evaluation of High School Equivalency Program Requirements, Department of Public Instruction (Madison, Wis.: author, January 1991), 3.
  41. *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 16, 22.
  42. Daniel Bice, "Benson Lowers Score Needed to Earn GED Diploma," Milwaukee Sentinel 2 August 1994, pp. 1A, 8A.
  43. Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "Wisconsin GED Statistics, Statewide Summaries/Center Breakouts, 1/1/01-6/30/02" 5 August 2002; GED Testing Service, Who Passed the GED Tests? 2002 Statistical Report.
  44. "Benson Invites Public to Comment on Draft Academic Standards," Press Release, Department of Public Instruction, Madison, Wis., 20 September 1996.
  45. "Wisconsin Social Studies Academic Standards," Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Madison, Wis., 27 September 1996.
  46. Interview with Bob Enghagen, GED/HSED Administrator, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 5 August 2002.
  47. "Contracting with Technical Colleges and Other Ways to Complete High School" (Madison: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 17 October 2008, p. 7; "GED Option #2: Frequently Asked Questions & Answers" (Madison: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 9 September 2009) 15.
  48. GED Testing Service. 2008-09 GED Option Statistical Report (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, December 2009). Not treated in this paper is usage of the GED for incarcerated teens and adults or GED programs established for school-age youth at the technical colleges.