



# The Bell Policy Center

## Expanding Opportunity: The Need for Multiple High School Equivalency Assessment Options in Colorado

- *Thousands fewer Coloradans have taken and passed the new GED®.*
- *17 states have begun to administer high school equivalency tests in addition to or instead of the GED®.*

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### Executive Summary

The high school equivalency diploma is of utmost importance for student educational attainment and state workforce development. Every year, thousands of Coloradans — both youth and adults — pursue the high school equivalency diploma as a key stepping-stone to employment or postsecondary studies, or to ensure that they can be full partners in their own children’s educational success. For these individuals, passing a high school equivalency assessment and obtaining the diploma remains a critical step in achieving their personal, family and economic goals. For our state, it remains one of the foundational building blocks in developing a strong workforce and competitive economy. **The Bell Policy Center believes that providing multiple high school equivalency assessment options to students is good education policy, is consistent with a multiple pathways approach to increasing student success and will expand opportunity in our state.**

There is a significant need for high school equivalency diplomas in the United States and Colorado. Nationally, 24.4 million working-age adults ages 18-64 lack a high school diploma or



the equivalent. In Colorado, more than 340,000 adults are without one, representing about 10 percent of the state's working-age population.<sup>1</sup>

Since its creation in 1942, the General Education Development (GED<sup>®</sup>) test<sup>2</sup> had been the standard used for assessing high school equivalency in every state, until an updated version began being administered in 2014. In 2011, the for-profit company Pearson joined the nonprofit American Council on Education to create and administer the new GED<sup>®</sup> test beginning in 2014. The new test is more expensive, aligned to Common Core standards and must be taken on a computer. Since the new test has been administered, there has been a substantial decrease in the number of people taking the test and the number of people passing it, leading many states, including Colorado, to consider alternative assessment options.<sup>3</sup>

Considering the challenges the new GED<sup>®</sup> presents, other high school equivalency tests have been developed. Among them, the High School Equivalency Test (HiSET), administered by Educational Testing Service, and the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC), originally developed by McGraw-Hill Education and currently administered by Data Recognition Corporation (DRC), have emerged as recognized and accepted alternatives to the GED<sup>®</sup>. Currently, 17 states offer the HiSET and/or TASC in addition to or in lieu of the GED<sup>®</sup> for determining high school equivalency, with 10 of those states eliminating the GED<sup>®</sup> altogether.<sup>4</sup>

In Colorado, the GED<sup>®</sup> remains the only test approved to qualify for a high school equivalency diploma. However, with thousands fewer people taking and passing the test, Colorado's experience resembles those states that have now chosen to offer alternatives to the GED<sup>®</sup>. Following suit, Colorado has begun the process to decide whether to approve other high school equivalency tests.

**The Bell Policy Center recommends that the State Board of Education approve multiple high school equivalency tests for use in Colorado to increase the number of Coloradans, both youth and adults, obtaining a high school equivalency diploma. Offering multiple options for high school equivalency assessments would recognize and support the wide variety of learning styles, testing format preferences, financial circumstances, life goals and postsecondary and workforce aspirations that the diverse students seeking a high school equivalency diploma bring with them, and benefit all concerned — students, employers and the state.**

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<sup>1</sup> Working Poor Families Project, American Community Survey 2013, analysis by Population Reference Bureau, <http://www.workingpoorfamilies.org/indicators/>. The Bell Policy Center is the Working Poor Families Project's Colorado state partner.

<sup>2</sup> The GED<sup>®</sup> is actually a battery of multiple tests covering various subject matter areas, rather than a single test. However, for simplicity of language, we refer to it as the GED<sup>®</sup> or the GED<sup>®</sup> test throughout this brief, and to the individual subject matter tests as sections.

<sup>3</sup> Valerie Strauss, "The big problems with Pearson's new GED high school equivalency test," The Washington Post, July 9, 2015 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2015/07/09/the-big-problems-with-pearsons-new-ged-high-school-equivalency-test/>

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Zinth, "GED HiSET and TASC Test: A comparison of high school equivalency assessments," Education Commission of the States, July 2015 <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/20/38/12038.pdf>



## Background on the GED<sup>®</sup>

The GED<sup>®</sup> was created in 1942 by the American Council on Education as an opportunity for World War II veterans, who had left high school early, to obtain a high school equivalency diploma in preparation for attending college. Since then, more than 18 million people worldwide have passed the GED<sup>®</sup>.<sup>5</sup> The GED<sup>®</sup> is the most common route for obtaining an equivalency diploma and has served adults who for whatever reason have not completed a formal high school education, as well as immigrants and out-of-school youth. One in seven adults with a high school diploma got it through the GED<sup>®</sup>, while one in 20 adults entering college passed the GED<sup>®</sup>.<sup>6</sup>

The GED<sup>®</sup> has often served low-skilled adults and minorities. The average age of those who passed the GED<sup>®</sup> in the past decade is 26, and the race/ethnicity distribution is approximately 51 percent white, 21 percent Hispanic, 23 percent African-American and 5 percent other.<sup>7</sup>

Over time, the GED<sup>®</sup> has undergone major revisions to keep it up-to-date with changing high school curricula. The American Council on Education updated the GED<sup>®</sup> three times, in 1978, 1988 and 2002.<sup>8</sup> However, in 2009, the American Council on Education found that it could not cover the costs of another GED<sup>®</sup> update, so it asked for testing groups to partner with it. Pearson, the for-profit publishing and assessment company, agreed to join the American Council on Education in a joint venture to create a new test.<sup>9</sup>

Until 2014, the GED<sup>®</sup> consisted of five subject tests: reading, writing, math, science and social studies. The updated GED<sup>®</sup> is condensed into four: reasoning through language arts, mathematical reasoning, science and social studies. The subject tests can be taken individually or all at once, with the entire test taken over seven hours. Students typically take the subject tests over the course of a few weeks or months. In most states, adult education programs and other organizations working with adults and out-of-school-youth provide test preparation courses, and GED<sup>®</sup> test examination sites are overseen by the state.<sup>10</sup> For example, in Colorado, the State Board of Education approves the high school equivalency test(s), while the Colorado Department of Education approves testing centers.

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<sup>5</sup> Carol Clymer, “Preparing for the New GED Test: What to Consider Before 2014,” The Working Poor Families Project, Fall 2012 [http://www.workingpoorfamilies.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/WFPF-fall-brief\\_2012.pdf](http://www.workingpoorfamilies.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/WFPF-fall-brief_2012.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Barry Shaffer, “The Changing Landscape of High School Equivalency in the U.S.,” Center for Law and Social Policy, May 2015 <http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/publication-1/The-Changing-Landscape-of-High-School-Equivalency-in-the-U.S.-Final.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Caroline Porter, “High-School Equivalency Degree Loses its Dominant Position,” The Wall Street Journal, February 9, 2015 <http://www.wsj.com/articles/high-school-equivalency-degree-loses-its-dominant-position-1423521427>

<sup>10</sup> Carol Clymer, “Preparing for the New GED Test: What to Consider Before 2014”



## A Decline in the Number of People Taking and Passing the GED®

Since the new GED® was implemented in 2014, fewer people nationwide and in Colorado are taking and passing the test, making obtaining a high school equivalency diploma a critical barrier to increased prosperity for many. Although the GED® test had been updated three times previously since 1942, the most recent changes have been the most extensive.<sup>11</sup>

Table 1 presents national data for 2000 through 2014 on the number of people taking one segment of the GED® test, the number of people completing the entire GED®, the number of people passing the GED® and passing rates for people who completed the full GED® and for those who took at least one section of the GED®.

**Table 1: National GED® Analytics: 2000-2014<sup>12 13</sup>**

Year	Number of people who took at least one GED® section	Number of people who completed the full GED®	Number of people who passed the full GED®	GED® completers passing rate <sup>A</sup>	GED® starters passing rate <sup>B</sup>
2000	830,063	718,159	497,674	69.3%	60.0%
2001	1,033,967	945,131	658,015	69.6%	63.6%
2002	557,364	467,332	329,515	70.5%	59.1%
2003	657,239	552,396	387,470	70.1%	59.0%
2004	665,927	570,217	405,724	71.2%	60.9%
2005	680,874	587,689	423,714	72.1%	62.2%
2006	676,020	580,107	398,409	68.7%	58.9%
2007	691,899	600,023	429,149	71.5%	62.0%
2008	737,233	642,183	469,168	73.1%	63.6%
2009	747,809	645,281	448,131	69.4%	59.9%
2010	720,294	622,651	451,973	72.6%	62.7%
2011	691,576	601,576	434,126	72.2%	62.8%
2012	674,051	581,083	401,388	69.1%	59.5%
2013	816,213	713,960	540,535	75.7%	66.2%
2014 (estimated)	248,000	143,333	86,000	60.0%	34.7%

<sup>A</sup> The number of people who passed the full GED® compared to the number who completed the full GED®.

<sup>B</sup> The number people who passed the full GED® compared to the number who completed at least one GED® section.

<sup>11</sup> Barry Shaffer, “The Changing Landscape of High School Equivalency in the U.S.”

<sup>12</sup> 2000-2013 GED Testing Program Statistical Report, GED Testing Service

<sup>13</sup> Numbers from 2014 are based on preliminary data from GED® Testing Service

as reported by Kaitlin Mulhere, “GED numbers down amid time of transition for high school equivalency exams,” Inside Higher Ed, January 20, 2015 <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/01/20/ged-numbers-down-amid-time-transition-high-school-equivalency-exams>



These data show that the number of people who have taken and passed the full GED<sup>®</sup> dropped dramatically in 2014 following the recent revisions. The passing rate for those who started the GED<sup>®</sup> by taking at least one section of the test showed an even greater drop. The passing rate reported by GED<sup>®</sup> Testing Service is based on the number of people who took and passed the full GED<sup>®</sup> test. For example, in 2014 based on estimates from preliminary data, about 248,000 people took at least one of the four sections of the test and about 143,333 completed the full GED<sup>®</sup> (all four sections). Of those who completed the full GED<sup>®</sup>, at least 86,000 passed it resulting in a 60.0 percent passing rate for GED<sup>®</sup> completers. This is almost 16 percentage points lower than the 2013 passing rate and more than 11 percentage points lower than the 71.3 percent average passing rate for 2002 to 2013, the period since the last revisions to the GED<sup>®</sup> before 2014.

The total number of people who took the full GED<sup>®</sup> in 2014 dropped by 570,627 people from 2013 and 437,750 from 2012. This resulted in 454,535 fewer people passing the GED<sup>®</sup> in 2014 than in 2013 and 315,388 fewer than in 2012. While historically the numbers have rebounded after GED<sup>®</sup> updates, there was a 63 percent drop between 2012 and 2014 in the number of people taking at least one section of the GED<sup>®</sup>.

We also compared the number of people who passed the full GED<sup>®</sup> to the number of people who took at least one section of the test to create a GED<sup>®</sup> “starters” passing rate. This measure shows the portion of the people who began the GED<sup>®</sup> testing process and who ultimately went on to pass the full GED<sup>®</sup>. This measure indicates the level of persistence students exhibit in preparing for, taking and ultimately passing the test. It also shows the extent to which people have gotten discouraged and dropped out of the testing process before passing the GED<sup>®</sup>. The national GED<sup>®</sup> starters passing rate in 2014 was 31 percentage points lower than, or almost half, the 2012 starters passing rate. This is a possible sign that students are discouraged by the new GED<sup>®</sup> test.

Figure 1 presents national data showing how the number of people taking and passing the GED<sup>®</sup> test varied following recent revisions. When the GED<sup>®</sup> was updated in 2002, there was a significant decrease in people taking the test the year it was updated. This can be attributed to the fact that many people rush to take the test before it is changed, resulting in a surge in test-takers the year before. Similarly, there was a surge in people taking the test in 2013, the year before the 2014 update, and a substantial decrease in test-takers in the year of the update. Although the number of people taking the test declined substantially with the 2002 update, the numbers rebounded in the following years and remained consistent until there was another spike in 2013, followed by a decline in 2014.



**Figure 1: National GED® Data: 2000-2014<sup>14</sup>**

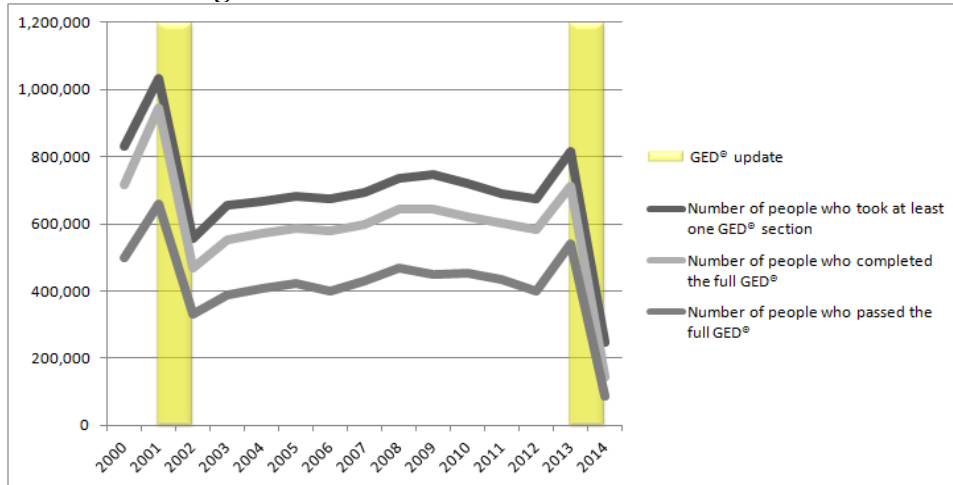
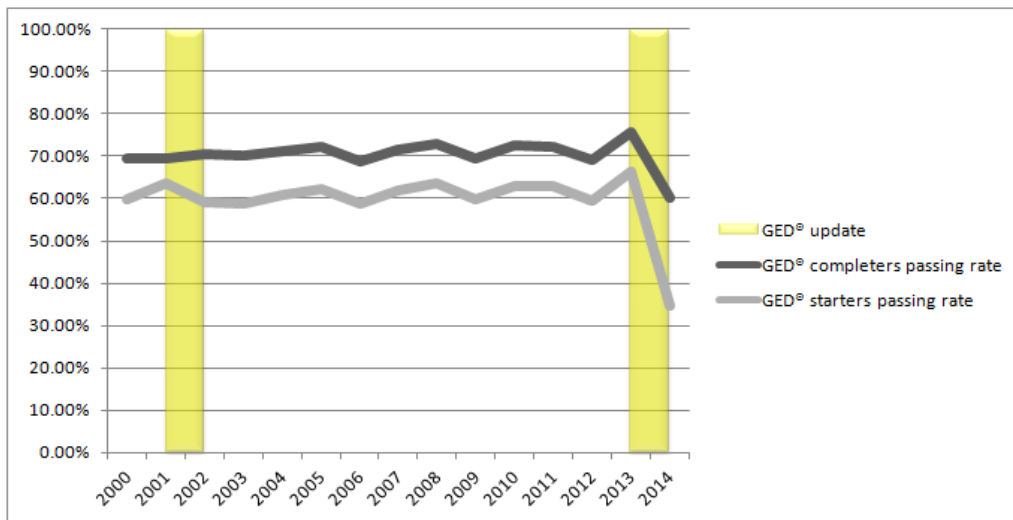


Figure 2 shows national data on the passing rates for the GED® from 2000 to 2014. The GED® completers passing rate remained constant, and there was only a slight decline in the GED® starters passing rate when the test was revised in 2002. Both passing rates remained relatively constant from 2003 through 2013.

**Figure 2: National GED® passing rates, 2000-2014<sup>15</sup>**



However, both passing rates dropped dramatically in 2014. This indicates that the changes made in 2014 were more drastic than the 2002 update, as fewer people were both taking and passing the 2014 GED®.

<sup>14</sup> 2000-2013 GED Testing Program Statistical Report, GED Testing Service  
<http://www.gedtesting.com/educators/historical-testing-data>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid



The results in Colorado have followed the national trends. Table 2 shows data from 2000 to year-to-date (YTD) 2015.

**Table 2: Colorado GED® Analytics: 2000-YTD 2015<sup>16 17</sup>**

Year	Number of people who took at least one GED® section	Number of people who completed the full GED®	Number of people who passed the full GED®	GED® completers passing rate <sup>A</sup>	GED® starters passing rate <sup>B</sup>
2000	15,345	9,780	9,688	99.1%	63.1%
2001	18,426	12,579	11,473	91.2%	62.3%
2002	11,216	8,312	6,967	83.8%	62.1%
2003	14,284	10,460	8,390	80.2%	58.7%
2004	14,568	11,000	9,076	82.5%	62.3%
2005	14,066	10,471	8,733	83.4%	62.1%
2006	13,848	10,134	8,309	82.0%	60.0%
2007	14,285	10,617	8,782	82.7%	61.5%
2008	15,629	11,678	9,724	83.3%	62.2%
2009	16,643	12,211	9,993	81.8%	60.0%
2010	17,129	12,670	10,433	82.3%	60.9%
2011	15,734	11,852	9,641	81.3%	61.3%
2012	15,540	11,369	9,376	82.5%	60.3%
2013	18,714	14,345	12,292	85.7%	65.7%
2014	4,469	2,431	1,715	70.5%	38.4%
YTD 2015	5,573	2,829	2,276	80.5%	40.8%

<sup>A</sup> The number of people who passed the full GED® compared to the number who completed the full GED®.

<sup>B</sup> The number of people who passed the full GED® compared to the number who completed at least one GED® section.

\*YTD is as of October 29, 2015

In 2014, 4,469 Coloradans took at least one section of the GED®, with 2,431 completing the full GED® (all four sections). Of these, 1,715 passed the full GED®, which represents a GED® completers passing rate of 70.5 percent. This is 15 percentage points lower than the GED® completers passing rate in 2013 and about 13 percentage points lower than the 82.6 percent average GED® completers passing rate between 2002 and 2013 — the period since the GED® was revised in 2002 and before it was revised in 2014. The GED® starters passing rate for 2014 was 38.4 percent, 17 percentage points lower than the same rate in 2013 and 23 percentage points lower than the 61.4 percent average rate between 2002 and 2013.

<sup>16</sup> 2000-2013 GED Testing Program Statistical Report, GED Testing Service

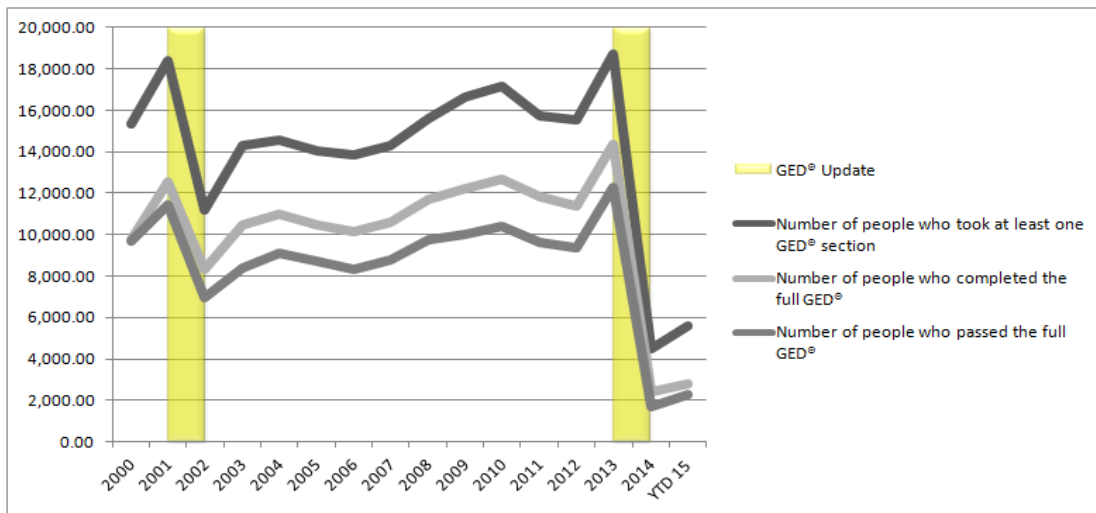
<sup>17</sup> 2014 and YTD 2015 data provided by the Colorado Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Readiness



The total number of Coloradans who took the full GED<sup>®</sup> in 2014 dropped by 11,914 people, or 83 percent, from 2013 and 8,938, or 79 percent, from 2012. This resulted in 10,577 fewer Coloradans passing the GED<sup>®</sup> in 2014 than in 2013 and 7,661 fewer than in 2012.

Comparable to the national experience, Colorado saw an increase in the number of people taking the GED<sup>®</sup> in the years prior to an update and a drop in the number taking it in the year of the update. Figure 3 presents Colorado GED<sup>®</sup> data for 2000 through YTD 2015.

**Figure 3: CO GED<sup>®</sup> Data: 2000-YTD 2015**



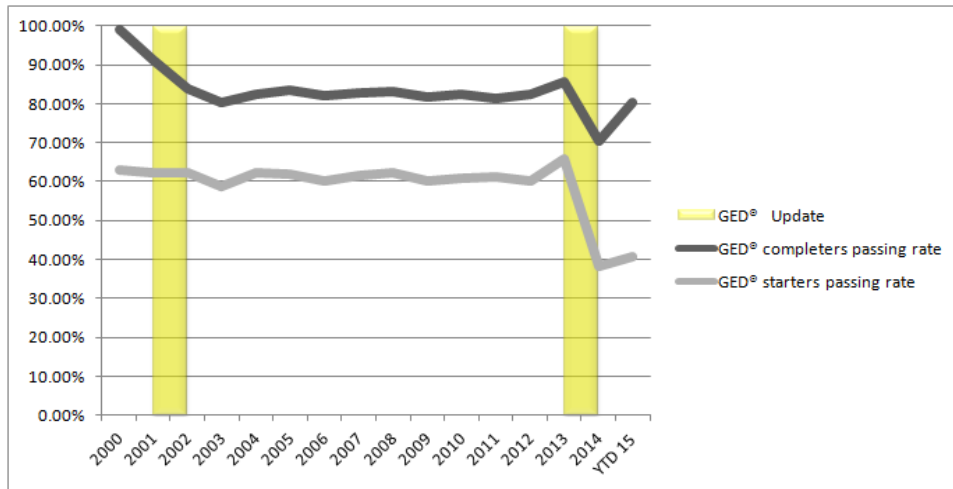
As the new GED<sup>®</sup> test was announced to begin in 2014, Colorado saw a surge in people taking the test in 2013. Since the new test was administered at the beginning of 2014, there has been a 74 percent decrease in the number of Coloradans who completed the full GED<sup>®</sup> from 2013 and a 67 percent decrease from 2012. In comparison, when the test was updated in 2002, there was a 34 percent decrease in the number of Coloradans completing the full GED<sup>®</sup> from 2001 to 2002 and only a 15 percent decrease between 2000 and 2002. Interestingly, so far in 2015 there has been a small increase in the number of Coloradans who took at least one GED<sup>®</sup> section, the number who completed the full GED<sup>®</sup> and the number who passed the full GED<sup>®</sup>.

Also analogous to the national experience is the significant reduction in the passing rate in Colorado since the updated GED<sup>®</sup> began in 2014. Figure 4 details Colorado GED<sup>®</sup> passing rates from 2000 to YTD 2015, with an emphasis on years in which the test was changed.





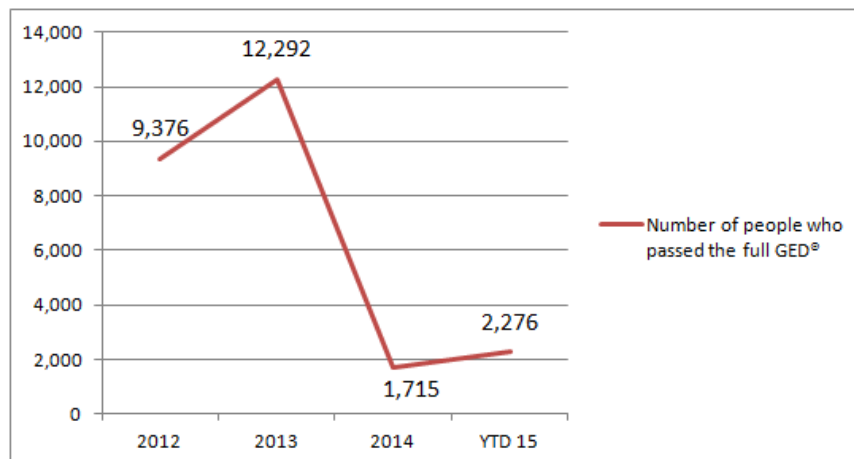
**Figure 4: CO GED® passing rates, 2000-YTD 2015**



The GED® completers passing rate fell in Colorado by 7 percentage points from 2001 to 2002, while the GED® starters passing rate remained roughly the same. However, from 2013 to 2014, both passing rates dropped, with a greater decrease occurring in the GED® starters passing rate.

So far in 2015, we have seen an increase of 10 percentage points in the GED® completers passing rate and a modest uptick in the GED® starters passing rate compared to 2014. It is expected that as students and educators become more familiar with the new test, the number of Coloradans who take and pass it will increase and possibly reach the levels seen under the old test. However, as Figure 5 shows, the total number of Coloradans who passed the GED® in 2012 and 2013 is four to seven times greater than in 2014 and year-to-date 2015.

**Figure 5: Number of Coloradans who passed the full GED® 2012-YTD 2015**



Finally, it is important to point out that these data reveal another important issue related to Colorado's efforts to address the need for the high school equivalency diploma. Historically,



only a small percent of Colorado's total eligible population — that is, Coloradans ages 18 to 64 who lack a high school diploma or the equivalent — have been served by and participated in the GED® testing process.

Between 2000 and 2012, Colorado's eligible population ranged from a low of 333,045 in 2011 to a high of 398,399 in 2002. During that same period, the percent of Colorado's eligible population taking at least one section of the GED® test ranged from a low of 2.8 percent in 2002 (the year of the earlier test revision) to a high of 5.0 percent in 2010. Even in 2013 with the surge in participation prior to the latest test revision, only 5.5 percent (18,714) of those eligible (340,310) took at least one section of the GED®. Assuming that the state's eligible population has remained unchanged, those figures for 2014 and YTD 2015 are 1.3 percent and 1.6 percent, respectively.<sup>18</sup>

Approving additional high school equivalency tests in Colorado beyond the GED® could help more students overcome the barriers associated with that test by providing a broader set of viable assessment options, thus leading to increased participation and success in obtaining a high school equivalency diploma among the state's eligible population.

### **Explaining the Decline in People Taking and Passing the GED®**

Several factors have been identified as contributing to the decline in the number of people taking and passing the GED®, both nationally and in Colorado. Among them are the new GED®'s alignment with Common Core standards, its cost and its availability only in computer-based format. According to some sources, these changes have limited the number of testing sites and reduced access for test-takers.<sup>19</sup>

When Pearson and the American Council on Education formed their partnership in 2011, the goal was to develop a new GED® test aligned with Common Core standards. However, it remains a matter of serious debate whether Common Core standards are the appropriate measure by which high school equivalency should be set.<sup>20</sup> This is especially the case given the broad range of interests and goals expressed by students seeking an equivalency diploma. Additionally, on average, people taking the GED® have been out of school for nine years when they take the test and most were not taught to Common Core curriculum when they attended school.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to the GED®, the HiSET and TASC tests intend to align with Common Core State Standards gradually by 2017, similar to K-12 education, rather than immediately as the new GED® did.<sup>22</sup>

Even small differences in test costs can be an important issue for many low-income students. The cost of the new GED® is significantly higher than the old version of the test, and is generally

<sup>18</sup> Bell Policy Center analysis: GED® Testing Service 2000-2013 data; Colorado Department of Education 2014 and YTD 2015 data; Working Poor Families Project, American Community Survey 2000-2013, analysis by Population Reference Bureau.

<sup>19</sup> Valerie Strauss, "The big problems with Pearson's new GED high school equivalency test"

<sup>20</sup> Daniel McGraw, "Making the Case for a Good-Enough Diploma," *Pacific Standard*, November 2015  
<http://www.psmag.com/books-and-culture/making-the-case-for-a-good-enough-diploma>

<sup>21</sup> Carol Clymer, "Preparing for the New GED Test: What to Consider Before 2014"

<sup>22</sup> Barry Shaffer, "The Changing Landscape of High School Equivalency in the U.S."



more expensive than both the HiSET and TASC. However, costs charged to people taking the tests vary from state to state. The base cost for the full HiSET and TASC test batteries are \$50 and \$52, respectively — compared to \$80 for the GED<sup>®</sup>. For the GED<sup>®</sup>, most states charge an additional \$40 for test center compensation, increasing the cost to \$120. In 13 states, including Colorado, the cost of the GED<sup>®</sup> exceeds \$120 because of other state fees.<sup>23</sup> In Colorado, the cost for taking the full GED<sup>®</sup> test has increased from \$60 before 2013, to \$125-\$150 in 2013 (testing centers were given flexibility in testing prices), and to \$150 since 2014.<sup>24</sup> While several states offer subsidies for low-income students taking the GED<sup>®</sup> to offset the financial burden of the test, Colorado does not. It is important to note that, just as with the GED<sup>®</sup>, many states add test center and/or state fees to the HiSET and TASC base charges, as well, which can also raise the total costs of those tests considerably.<sup>25</sup>

Making the GED<sup>®</sup> available in computer-based format only is a significant obstacle for many students, especially those adults with limited access to, and comfort with, computers. Even students with a great deal of familiarity with and skills on the computer may prefer to take a paper-based test for a number of reasons. Unlike the GED<sup>®</sup>, the HiSET and TASC are available to students in both paper-based and computer-based formats. The importance for many students of having tests available in multiple formats — and especially a paper-and-pencil option — is clearly shown by the experience of New Hampshire. That state offers the HiSET in both computer-based and paper-based formats, but 85 percent of test takers self-select the paper-based test.<sup>26</sup> States that offer the GED<sup>®</sup> as the only available assessment option deny students the opportunity to choose the test format in which they can be most successful.

One final point is worth noting here in relation to the declining number of people passing the GED<sup>®</sup>. Prior to 2014, the GED<sup>®</sup> Testing Service determined a passing grade based on a student's overall score on the test. Students had to score a minimum of 410 on each section, but in order to pass the GED<sup>®</sup> they had to have an average score of 450 on all five sections. If they did poorly on one section, they could make up for it by scoring higher on another. The new GED<sup>®</sup>, however, requires that students pass each of the four sections individually. They must score at least 150 out of 200 possible points on each section.<sup>27</sup>

## Impact of the Decline on Students and Our State

Obtaining a high school equivalency diploma is a necessary step toward academic and economic success for many of those who did not earn a traditional high school diploma. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the attainment of a high school diploma or equivalent can significantly boost wages and employment and can open the door for postsecondary education.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Jennifer Zinth, “GED HiSET and TASC Test: A comparison of high school equivalency assessments”

<sup>24</sup> Email correspondence between the Bell Policy Center and Glenda Sinks, Community College of Denver

<sup>25</sup> Jennifer Zinth, “GED HiSET and TASC Test: A comparison of high school equivalency assessments”

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> “GED Testing Service FAQs” <http://www.gedtesting.com/educators/2014-faqs>

<sup>28</sup> Carol Clymer, “Preparing for the New GED Test: What to Consider Before 2014”



Typically, the majority of people without a high school diploma are economically disadvantaged and rely on passing high school equivalency assessments to obtain employment or further their education and training. In Colorado, more than 53,000 low-income working families include at least one parent without a high school diploma or the equivalent, far exceeding the number of students currently engaged in and served by the GED<sup>®</sup> — the state’s sole approved high school equivalency testing option.<sup>29</sup> The impact of obtaining an equivalency diploma is especially important for women. The average earnings for a woman without a high school diploma are \$15,000, which is \$10,000 less than it is for a man without one.<sup>30</sup>

The adults and out-of-school youth who are currently not receiving their high school equivalency diplomas in Colorado tend to be low income and members of minority groups. The demographics of Colorado's adult learners, according to many adult education providers, show that nearly 75 percent are low income with more than 40 percent being from Hispanic and other minority groups.<sup>31</sup> For this cohort of Coloradans, digital literacy skills may be limited since they may not have access to and/or have little experience with computers. For them, taking a paper-and-pencil version may be a better and more practical option. Additionally, they may have limited exposure to Common Core standards, which may also be holding them back.

Of particular concern in our state is the drop in the number of students enrolled in adult education courses who pass the full GED<sup>®</sup> test. A survey of 12 adult education providers in Colorado representing a cross-section of programs across the state showed that from July 1, 2012, to June 30, 2013, 650 adult students passed all sections of the GED<sup>®</sup>. From July 1, 2014, to June 30, 2015, only 128 adult students passed all sections of the updated GED<sup>®</sup>.<sup>32</sup> This demographic represents adults who are actively preparing for the GED<sup>®</sup> and looking to continue their education or obtain higher-paying jobs that require a high school equivalency diploma.

A survey by the Colorado Adult Education Professional Association (CAEPA) found that 44 percent of Adult Education and Family Literacy Act-funded programs experienced a decline in GED<sup>®</sup> student enrollment from 2012 to 2014. CAEPA reports that hundreds of students became discouraged when the new GED<sup>®</sup> began being administered and dropped out of adult education programs before passing the new GED<sup>®</sup>. As a result, these students are not continuing the education that could provide them with the skills leading to better-paying jobs. The survey also found that among those who passed the new GED<sup>®</sup>, fewer are enrolling in college compared to those who passed the old test.<sup>33</sup> CAEPA additionally notes that the considerable drop in students who pass the GED<sup>®</sup> since the test was updated raises serious concerns “for incumbent workers

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<sup>29</sup> Working Poor Families Project, American Community Survey 2013, analysis by Population Reference Bureau.

<sup>30</sup> Anna Boiko-Weyrauch, “Why are Coloradans going to Wyoming for High School Degrees,” Rocky Mountain PBS, November 2015 <http://inewsnetwork.org/2015/11/18/colorados-ged-test-numbers-drop-as-adult-learners-look-elsewhere/>

<sup>31</sup> Paulette Church, “The Impact of the 2014 GED on Adult Education in Colorado,” Colorado Adult Education Professional Association <http://blog.caepa.org/the-impact-of-the-2014-ged-on-adult-education-in-colorado-caepa/>

<sup>32</sup> Chaer Robert and Shirley Penn, High School Equivalency Task Force Fact Sheet, September 2, 2015

<sup>33</sup> Paulette Church, “The Impact of the 2014 GED on Adult Education in Colorado”



who need this pathway to post-secondary certificate and workforce training programs leading to family sustainable wages.”<sup>34</sup>

The significant decrease in the number of people taking and passing the new GED<sup>®</sup> negatively affects not only individual students, but harms our ability to meet our national and state workforce goals, as well. The GED<sup>®</sup> Testing Service says that the test became more challenging to address postsecondary and workforce readiness. However, according to a recent article highlighting the concerns about the changes in the new GED<sup>®</sup>:

What the new test does not address very well, and perhaps works against, is the coming dearth of qualified workers in middle-skills jobs: nursing, computer technology, manufacturing, and other fields that require some post-secondary education and training - computer skills, yes, but not calculus. About half of the U.S. labor force works in those fields, and the shortage of those types of workers is expected to grow substantially as Baby Boomers retire. About 25 million new middle-skill job openings are expected by 2020.<sup>35</sup>

To fill these middle-skill jobs and boost wages for low-income Americans, the nation will need to find a way to improve access to and success in obtaining the high school equivalency diploma as an initial gateway to academic and employment success. For Colorado, too, this has been identified as a top priority. Among the key recommendations made in the state’s October 15, 2015, *Colorado Talent Pipeline Report* is the critical need to:

Develop policies and initiatives to re-engage adults in educational settings so that they can acquire the skills and credentials necessary to enter and to participate more fully in the workforce. Colorado will never close the attainment gap or the middle skills gap if we solely focus on individuals currently in our education systems. Adults who are underemployed due to a lack of appropriate skills must be re-engaged in rapid attainment skills that are critical for Colorado’s industries to grow.<sup>36</sup>

As CAEPA notes, the significant decrease in the number of people who earn a high school equivalency diploma will be a problem for the state as it moves forward because Colorado will not be able to meet its future workforce needs.<sup>37</sup> Continuing to provide the GED<sup>®</sup> as the only approved pathway to the high school equivalency diploma in Colorado is a barrier to achieving these workforce goals.

## **Many States Have Expanded High School Equivalency Exam Options**

The unprecedented changes to the GED<sup>®</sup> test prompted many states to reconsider their options for assessing high school equivalency. When it was announced that the GED<sup>®</sup> would undergo

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> Daniel McGraw, "Making the Case for a Good-Enough Diploma"

<sup>36</sup> Colorado Talent Pipeline Report, Colorado Workforce Development Council, October 15, 2015  
<https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/cwdc/colorado-talent-pipeline-report>

<sup>37</sup> Paulette Church, "The Impact of the 2014 GED on Adult Education in Colorado"



substantial revisions, states began to explore options. Several states ultimately either changed or approved additional tests for granting a high school equivalency diploma. According to the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), the three most common reasons for switching tests were the increased price of the new GED<sup>®</sup>, the need to offer a paper-pencil test format and the desire and/or legal mandate not to contract with a for-profit vendor.<sup>38</sup>

In response to the concerns surrounding the new GED<sup>®</sup>, two well-known companies within the education community, Educational Testing Service and McGraw-Hill, developed their own high school equivalency tests, the HiSET and TASC, respectively. Data Recognition Corporation (DRC) later acquired part of McGraw-Hill Education and now administers the TASC.

The process of changing or expanding high school equivalency assessment options has generally involved states issuing requests for proposals (RFP) or requests for applications (RFA) from test vendors. Based on the RFPs and RFAs, states have awarded contracts to high school equivalency vendors to offer the examination in the state. State departments of education have led the process in the majority of states that adopted the new tests.<sup>39</sup>

The value of offering multiple options in high school equivalency assessments is best expressed by Troy Tallabas, the high school equivalency certification program manager for the Wyoming Community College System:

Just as students have different learning styles, they also have different assessment preferences. Students who have never been exposed to instruction aligned to the Common Core State Standards will struggle to know how to answer assessment items based on the Common Core State Standards and may not achieve success on those assessments. The practice of offering a monolithic assessment program begs the question, “Are you fully accommodating that student's learning needs if you are not offering all assessment options available?”<sup>40</sup>

Wyoming is one of five states that offer all three options for earning a high school equivalency diploma. In fact, students from Colorado are travelling to Wyoming to take the HiSET and TASC and receive a high school equivalency diploma from that state so that they can continue pursuing their education or employment goals.<sup>41</sup> As this illustrates, offering students a choice of equally valid tests can increase their chances of obtaining a diploma and boost their efforts to advance economically. Multiple tests also allow program and policy developers who are working with various populations to pick a test in consultation with their students that is best suited to the students' particular needs and goals.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Barry Shaffer, "The Changing Landscape of High School Equivalency in the U.S."

<sup>39</sup> Jennifer Zinth, "GED HiSET and TASC Test: A comparison of high school equivalency assessments"

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

<sup>41</sup> Anna Boiko-Weyrauch, "Why are Coloradans going to Wyoming for High School Degrees?"

<sup>42</sup> Barry Shaffer, "Strengthening State Adult Education Policies For English As A Second Language Populations," The Working Poor Families Project, Fall 2014, [http://www.workingpoorfamilies.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/WPFP-Fall-2014-Brief\\_121814.pdf](http://www.workingpoorfamilies.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/WPFP-Fall-2014-Brief_121814.pdf)



The exact criteria states have used to approve certain tests have varied; however, a HiSET official at Educational Testing Service identified the following criteria utilized in the consideration of the HiSET test in many states:

- Accessibility: having a paper-based option for test takers.
- Price point: ability for the test to be affordable to the population of residents that would benefit from a high school equivalency credential.
- Alignment to state standards: ensure the test is rigorous and similar to what is required by high school students in terms of content.
- Ease of administration of computer-based testing: no additional requirements for testing centers like new software or hardware.
- Data management: the ability to receive state- and test center-specific data in a timely fashion in order to issue the credentials.
- Trainings for test center administrators and adult education programs: ensure that there is a thorough process of providing resources that would make the transition a smooth one.<sup>43</sup>

As of July 2015, 17 states have begun to administer high school equivalency tests in addition to or instead of the GED<sup>®</sup>, while several states have approved alternative tests that will be administered at a later date. Table 3 shows which states currently offer alternatives to the GED<sup>®</sup> and which test(s) they offer.

**Table 3: States that offer alternatives to the GED<sup>®</sup>**<sup>44</sup>

<b>TASC only:</b>	Indiana, New York, West Virginia
<b>HiSET only:</b>	Iowa, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire
<b>HiSET and GED<sup>®</sup>:</b>	New Mexico, Tennessee
<b>GED<sup>®</sup>, HiSET and TASC:</b>	California, Nevada, New Jersey, North Carolina, Wyoming
<b>GED<sup>®</sup> Only:</b>	Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, Washington D.C., West Virginia

Other states are considering approving alternatives to the GED<sup>®</sup>. Colorado, Texas and Virginia have begun the RFA process,<sup>45</sup> and Illinois and South Carolina have announced they will be

<sup>43</sup> Email correspondence with Douglas M. Garcia, Director, ETS High School Equivalency Test

<sup>44</sup> Jennifer Zinth, “GED HiSET and TASC Test: A comparison of high school equivalency assessments”

<sup>45</sup> Valerie Strauss, “The big problems with Pearson’s new GED high school equivalency test, The Washington Post, July 9, 2015 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2015/07/09/the-big-problems-with-pearsons-new-ged-high-school-equivalency-test/>



offering the TASC alongside the GED<sup>®</sup> at a later date. Tennessee also announced it will be offering only the HiSET beginning in 2016.<sup>46</sup>

The adoption of multiple high school equivalency tests in several states has set the precedent for viewing the HiSET and TASC as equally valid options to the GED<sup>®</sup> in terms of measuring high school equivalency. In 2014, 43,000 students took the TASC with a 59 percent passing rate. An additional 50,000 students took the HiSET with a 62 percent passing rate. When compared to a 60 percent national passing rate with the new GED<sup>®</sup> in 2014, this suggests that there is equal rigor among the various tests. The difference among them lies in formats, costs and test design.<sup>47</sup>

### **Colorado Considering Multiple High School Equivalency Tests**

Although Colorado has currently approved only the GED<sup>®</sup>, the state has begun the process to consider alternative high school equivalency assessment options. In 2014, the Colorado legislature replaced the term “GED<sup>®</sup>” in all state statutes with “high school equivalency examination,” making it possible for the state to consider alternative tests.<sup>48</sup> In October 2015, the State Department of Education released a Request For Application (RFA) to vendors of high school equivalency tests that the State Board of Education will use to determine which test or tests will be approved for issuing a high school equivalency diploma in Colorado.<sup>49</sup> This RFA process is similar to the ones used in other states that have changed or expanded their approved testing option(s).

The RFA “is designed to determine which high school equivalency examination(s) will be presented to the State Board of Education for consideration for approval for use in Colorado.” The successful vendor or vendors must have a minimum of three years of experience providing services for large-scale results-driven testing programs, and the tests must be aligned with state academic standards.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, the vendors must have demonstrated experience in:

- Developing and administering large-scale assessments by paper and/or computer.
- Providing training for test administration staff.
- Conducting professional development for educators preparing students.
- Ensuring exam and data privacy and security.
- Providing data analysis on success and outcomes of students.
- Delivery of tests and test-related materials in a timely and secure manner.

To-date, vendor applications have been collected and have been reviewed and evaluated. The State Board of Education will be considering the outcomes of the RFA process at their December

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<sup>46</sup> Jennifer Zinth, "GED HiSET and TASC Test: A comparison of high school equivalency assessments"

<sup>47</sup> Caroline Porter, "High-School Equivalency Degree Loses its Dominant Position"

<sup>48</sup> Colorado Senate Bill 14-085, "Concerning High School Equivalency Examinations in Colorado"

<sup>49</sup> The Bell Policy Center's public comments to the State Board of Education on the RFA process can be found at <http://bellpolicy.org/research/public-comment-state-board-education-high-school-equivalency-program-rulemaking-and-rfa>

<sup>50</sup> "Request for Application, Colorado High School Equivalency Examination," Colorado Department of Education





9-10, 2015, meeting and could decide on which test, or tests, to approve for the granting of Colorado high school equivalency diplomas at that time.

Finally, in addition to these activities, it is important to note that a coalition of groups from throughout the state that support the expansion of approved high school equivalency assessment options in Colorado has been formed and is working on legislation for the forthcoming state legislative session to achieve this goal.<sup>51</sup>

## Recommendations

**The Bell Policy Center recommends that the State Board of Education approve multiple high school equivalency examinations for use in Colorado to increase the number of Coloradans, both youth and adults, obtaining a high school equivalency diploma. Offering multiple options for high school equivalency assessments would recognize and support the wide variety of learning styles, testing format preferences, financial circumstances, life goals and postsecondary and workforce aspirations that the diverse students seeking a high school equivalency diploma bring with them and benefit all concerned — students, employers and the state.**

As shown by the decrease in Coloradans taking and passing the new GED<sup>®</sup> test, it is evident that continuing to use the GED<sup>®</sup> as the only high school equivalency assessment option in the state presents a key barrier to thousands of Coloradans who want to advance in their careers and their education and to our state in achieving its workforce goals. However, the availability of new assessment options presents an opportunity for our state. When the changes to the GED<sup>®</sup> were announced in 2012, the Working Poor Families Project urged states:

To rethink their overall approach to adult education by ensuring that the state system and local providers provide the best options for all students, including working adults, to gain the skills needed to obtain higher levels of education and better employment. This means thinking beyond the GED<sup>®</sup> test and focusing on making other HSED (High School Equivalency Diploma) options work for more students, especially working adults.<sup>52</sup>

Giving students options by approving multiple tests will assist many Coloradans seeking to improve their economic circumstance through obtaining a high school equivalency diploma. Both the HiSET and TASC tests provide important alternatives due to their availability in computer-based and paper-based options, lower costs and professionally verified standards.<sup>53 54</sup>

Authorizing additional high school equivalency tests in Colorado does not mean the GED<sup>®</sup> should be dropped. The GED<sup>®</sup> remains a recognized avenue for high school equivalency, and continues to be an appropriate option for many students. As educators and students become more

<sup>51</sup> The Bell Policy Center is a member of this coalition.

<sup>52</sup> Carol Clymer, "Preparing for the New GED Test: What to Consider Before 2014"

<sup>53</sup> "Why the HiSET Program," [http://hiset.ets.org/states\\_educators/why\\_hiset/](http://hiset.ets.org/states_educators/why_hiset/)

<sup>54</sup> "TASC Test Advantage," <http://www.tasctest.com/the-tasc-test-advantage-for-educators.html>



familiar with the updated GED<sup>®</sup>, the number of students passing it has increased.<sup>55</sup> However, the number is still significantly lower than in past years, preventing thousands from receiving a high school equivalency diploma. Multiple assessment options would help remedy this problem.

## Conclusion

Obtaining a high school equivalency diploma has long been an important step on the pathway toward a better life. However, the past few years have seen the high school equivalency testing landscape evolve. It is fundamental for the state to support its people in their educational endeavors and promote opportunity.

In 2014, nearly 100,000 Americans were granted a high school equivalency through the HiSET and TASC tests because states decided to give their students additional options beyond the GED<sup>®</sup> for obtaining a diploma. Colorado should be a part of this evolution to meet the educational and employment needs of all Coloradans. **We urge Colorado's State Board of Education to approve multiple high school equivalency tests to expand opportunity in our state.**

## Acknowledgement

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<sup>55</sup> "GED Participation & Outcomes, FY2014-2015 Report" Colorado Department of Education  
<https://www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/geddatafy1415>