


[Home](#) » [News](#) » [Education](#) [Education](#)

Report reveals GED recipients fare little better than dropouts

MPS schools with GED options increased from 3 to 15 since 2002

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Every high school has probably had one - a student who is smart enough but who, for one reason or another, falls so far behind that a diploma and graduation seem out of reach.

For a growing number of Wisconsin school districts over the past decade, the answer to this problem has been found in an old program: the General Educational Development tests, or GED.

Since 2001, the number of districts in the state that allow students to receive a high school diploma by passing one or more GED tests has grown to 115, or more than a quarter of the state's school systems.

In the Milwaukee area, school districts from Elmbrook and Oconomowoc to Greenfield and Wauwatosa have been authorized to offer the program. Milwaukee Public Schools has one of the oldest GED programs, expanding from three schools in 2002 to 14 sites today.

Called the GED Option 2, the initiative expanded on another effort that Wisconsin helped pioneer that allowed high school students to receive GED certificates from technical colleges and other community-based entities. Unlike the previous program, however, GED Option 2 promises students the chance to participate in their high school's commencement ceremony and receive a regular high school diploma with their peers.

"It has expanded as a way for our districts to serve people who are bright - they have to have a ninth-grade reading level - and can do the work, (but) they aren't going to stay another three or four years to get a high school diploma," said Beth Lewis, a school administration consultant at the state Department of Public Instruction who oversees at-risk and alternative education programming.

In addition to requiring that students eligible for the GED program have at least a ninth-grade reading level, the state also requires that they be at least 17 years old and at least a year in credits behind their peers.

But a new report by economists at the University of Chicago raises questions about whether GED-based programs are the right approach to make sure students complete high school. Looking at a variety of

studies of GED recipients over the years, the report concludes that people who receive GEDs fare little better economically than high school dropouts when factors such as their greater academic abilities are taken into consideration.

The authors of the report, released last week by the National Bureau of Economic Research, also say that the availability of the GED at younger ages could push more students out of traditional school programs.

Not enough data exists on the GED options programs in 11 states to evaluate their graduates' results afterward, said Nicholas Mader, a postdoctoral scholar at the University of Chicago and one of the report's co-authors. But he pointed to one study that found that Oregon school districts with options programs experienced a 5% decrease in their four-year high school completion rates.

"On one hand, we would really want those programs to target kids that are going to drop out, so it gives them something to stay in school," Mader said. "On the other hand, it's possible that, at least for some kids, they would have been able to finish high school along a regular track, but this is kind of an easier means of just finishing up."

Lewis denied that Wisconsin schools' GED programs were being offered to anyone other than those who already are on the brink of leaving.

She also said that, even though not everyone might go on to higher education after earning their GEDs, it still makes sure that the door is open to those who want to.

Some Wisconsin school districts, such as MPS, even require that students apply to colleges as a condition of receiving their high school diplomas through the options programs.

Additionally, students in the GED Option 2 program at MPS have to take classes in financial literacy and job skills as well as other courses, such as health and citizenship, said Diane Rosado, the district's prevention intervention coordinator. Students take the GED tests only for those subjects where they have not earned enough credits to meet the district's graduation criteria, she said.

As one of the first teachers to implement the GED program in MPS, when she was a teacher at South Division High School, Rosado said she has seen the good it has done for students who otherwise would never have had a chance for a regular diploma.

Many of the students have had major upheavals in their lives, such as pregnancies or homelessness, that made it difficult to attend school for eight hours a day, Rosado said.

"I'm a firm believer in it because I've seen what it can do," she said.

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