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all write news

PUTTING STUDENTS ON THE GED FAST TRACK

by Marie Hassett

Many adults come to literacy programs hoping to earn a GED quickly. They may want the diploma in order to qualify for a job, to advance in the workplace, or to qualify for admission to a post-secondary or job-training program. Others face constraints like welfare-to-work timelines, or conditions of probation/parole. Program staff are eager to help these learners, but don't always know where to begin, or what activities will bring the greatest benefit. With the release of a new test in January 2002, the challenge of helping learners to earn a credential quickly has become even more difficult. This article will present data about how candidates are performing on the new GED and make suggestions to help programs and teachers structure fast track programs that meet their students' particular needs.

What Do We Know So Far?

As of July 2002, 153,000 candidates had taken the new GED. Sixty-four percent passed, down from sixty-nine percent on the old test in 2001. If five percent sounds small, consider the real numbers: Over one million people took the GED in 2001. A five percent decrease in passing percentage would mean approximately *fifty thousand fewer diplomas*. Closer to home, how many program directors would be comfortable with a five percent drop in their overall number of GED graduates?

The same 153,000 candidates had an average score of 2.3 on the essay portion of the Language Arts, Writing exam. Given that a 2.0 is the minimum score required for passing, this suggests that, while candidates may pass this portion of the test, their writing skills may not hold up to the demands of post-secondary work or more extensive writing on the job connected with a promotion.

Another important pattern is the percentage of people who pass the test

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SPEAKING OF YOUR HEALTH...

by Janice Jin

A little less than a year ago on a clear, Friday afternoon, I walked into a small classroom in the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center with Vanessa, a classmate and fellow ESOL tutor. We had just finished our training to become ESOL tutors as part of a medical school volunteer program, and we were eager to begin putting the training to use. Quiet greeted us as I saw half a dozen or so middle aged, Asian women scattered about the room. Some were gathered around the tiny table in the center, some were seated in front of the computers, while others were just sitting in chairs along the periphery. No one was talking. Sam, one of the BCNC teachers, made the introductions and explained to the women that Vanessa and I were students from Harvard Medical School who would be teaching a new class with a focus on health topics. Since this didn't seem to excite their interest, Sam also mentioned that this would be an excellent opportunity to practice conversational English. At this, several of the women nodded and smiled.

The introductions were short and sweet, and in a matter of minutes, Vanessa and I were left completely alone. We tried another round of more in-depth introductions, calling upon all the combined ice-breaker knowl-

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The deadline for submitting
material for the next issue is:
Feb. 15.**

**Happy
New Year!**

Putting Students on the GED Fast Track

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in each age cohort. For people in the 17-19 age group, the passing rate is 68%; for those 20-29, it's 65%; 30-39, 61%; 40-49, 60%; 50-59, 58%; 60+, 54%. In Massachusetts in 2001, the largest single group of test-takers was the 20-24 year old cohort, who accounted for 26.6% of all testers. However, 32.5% of test-takers were older than this group, which suggests that the decrease in passing rates for older candidates could have an impact in a number of programs.

The following chart shows the average scores and passing percentages broken down by subject area.

Test Passing Percentages & Average Standard Scores

	Passing %	Passers	Non-Passers
Reading	72%	522	364
Writing	70%	467	296
Math	68%	485	327
Science	71%	523	363
Social St.	71%	543	367
Battery		485	262

The significant discrepancies between average passing scores and average non-passing scores suggest a large gap between those who pass the test and those who do not. Among non-passers who take the whole battery, the average score of 262 is 42% below the minimum passing score of 450 and 46% below the average score for candidates who do pass the battery. (Passing percentages for the individual sections of the test are higher than those for the battery as a whole because candidates who are in the 70% passing Language Arts, Writing, for instance, may be among the 32% who fail Mathematics)

Even more disturbing are the average scores and passing percentages for people who are re-taking the test, as the chart below demonstrates.

Re-test Passing Percentages & Average Standard Scores

Reading	62%	408
Writing	71%	409
Math	53%	404
Science	48%	329
Social St.	54%	375

While retesters appear to make progress in Language Arts, their success rate for Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies is much lower. In fact, students who have failed one of these sections of the test appear to have only about a 50-50 chance of passing when they take the test again. And on no section of the test is the average score for retesters at a passing level. This suggests that even on tests like Language Arts, Writing, where 71% of retest candidates pass, the non-passing scores are so low that they keep the average from reaching a passing level. The average scores on Science and Social Studies are, respectively, 81 and 35 points below the mini-

imum required to pass, 121 and 75 points below the average score required to secure the credential.

Teachers and program directors can infer a number of things from this data, but four points seem especially critical for staff involved with fast track initiatives:

- **Younger students seem to have an advantage.** This is probably because of greater familiarity with standardized testing and the current public school curriculum.

- **Large gaps exist between passers and non-passers.** Much of this gap may be attributed to a lack of preparation, but retest scores suggest that mere familiarity with the form and content of the test is not sufficient to achieve a passing score.

- **The Language Arts (Reading & Writing) are students' greatest strength.** It can be argued that these sections of the test have changed the least in terms of the skill demands they make and in terms of teachers' need to make significant curricular changes from the 1988 test.

- **Students who have failed once are likely to fail again.** This is particularly important for teachers whose students say they just want to "brush up" before attempting to retest.

Teachers whose students want (or need) to prepare rapidly for the GED need to think in terms of the essential skills and knowledge that the new test demands.

Critical Components of GED Success

There are, in essence, only two kinds of knowledge that concern us in the classroom, declarative and procedural. Declarative knowledge is that which does not change, no matter how long it is known (the alphabet, the Bill of Rights, multiplication tables, etc.). Procedural knowledge is that which develops over time (reading & writing skills, problem solving, etc.). Both kinds of knowledge are critical to GED success. The checklist below includes the most important indicators of readiness for the GED:

- Reading fluency
- Competent essay writing
- Visual literacy skills
- Knowledge of the Casio fx-260 calculator and the Math answer grids
- Prior knowledge of key documents in Social Studies
- Prior knowledge of basic concepts in Science
- Subject-specific vocabulary

This list begins with knowledge that is procedural and then moves into more declarative knowledge because this is the best and most efficient way to help adult learners gain the knowledge and skills they need to pass the test. As their reading skills improve, they can better absorb and retain information about Social Studies and Science. As their visual literacy skills improve, and they become more skilled in working with information presented in graphs, charts, etc., they are better able to solve problems that include such information. Through reading and writing about topics in different subject areas, vocabulary will improve.

These competencies are the building blocks for effective

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tive fast track programs, because they focus on the skills and knowledge students need to pass the GED. When considering how best to organize these components into a curriculum, fast track teachers need to address student starting level, the length and intensity of the program, balancing activities, and maintaining focus in the classroom.

Starting Level: Most GED teachers have worked with students who were not quite ready for GED level work in all areas. When time limits are not urgent, this is not a problem; however, in a fast track situation, teachers need to consider setting more stringent limits on admission, or at least candidly advising students as to their true level of readiness. For programs of six months or less in duration, students should be able to score a minimum of 400 on each section of the Official Practice Test (OPT). Shorter programs (three months or less), should require a passing score on the OPT for at least three of five subject areas.

Length and Intensity of Program: Most teachers recognize that the majority of their students do not have much time outside of the classroom to study for the GED. If the test is a long way off, gaps of three or four days between classes do not present a significant impediment. But when a student is working in a compressed time frame, frequency of study becomes more critical. In order to achieve the desired results, intensity of program needs to be inversely proportional to its length. A program three months or less in duration should include at least nine hours of class time per week. For programs in the six-month range, six hours per week is the minimum necessary; in a program of only six hours per week, every effort should be made to encourage students to do homework.

Balance of Activities Obviously, in a tight time frame, curriculum should be individualized to the strengths and weaknesses of each student. Those teachers using the OPT in its electronic form can review the results in some depth with regard to the specific subcontent areas of each test, and can evaluate students' higher-order thinking skills in terms of their answers as they plan each student's program of study. Beyond this, teachers do well to include both activities that will build skills in areas of weakness and develop greater strength in areas where the student is already skilled. This strategy helps to reduce the incidence of students passing each section of the test with a minimum 410, but failing to earn a credential because they have not reached an average score of 450.

While activities that build both procedural and declarative knowledge are valuable elements of any class, fast track classes should include a greater proportion of procedural activities. Given that such a class is unlikely to cover all of the material a student will encounter on the GED, good reading, writing and problem-solving ability will mitigate the effects of unfamiliar material. The most valuable activity in any GED class is sustained, silent reading. Few stu-

dents have time to do this outside of class, but it is critical for building reading fluency, which is itself the most important skill a student can have in relation to the GED.

Focus In order to achieve success in limited time, GED fast track programs need to maintain a narrow focus on the skills and knowledge needed to pass the test. This includes both the kinds of skills and knowledge in the checklist above and familiarity with the form of the GED test itself. This may at first sound limited, but when we consider the broadened scope of the new test, it is clear that even a teacher focusing exclusively on materials related to the GED will be hard-pressed to cover everything of value.

Prior to taking the operational test, each student should once again take the OPT for the subjects he/she will be trying to pass. If students' scores make the prospect of passing the test seem limited, teachers should counsel them to wait and prepare further, if at all possible. This is not what most learners want to hear, but again, given the level of failure exhibited by retesters thus far, it is in each student's best interest not to take the GED until the chances of success are better than hit-or-miss.

In conclusion, the most successful fast track programs will be those that: plan carefully around the strengths and weaknesses of each student; build procedural knowledge in order to improve students' ability to absorb and retain declarative knowledge; provide opportunities to build reading skill; maintain a tight focus on GED form and content; and counsel students realistically about their chances for success.

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