INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the field of adult education will be challenged with a new GED® test. The current test was implemented in 2002. Test-takers who have passed some but not all sections of the current test by the end of 2013 will have to start over with the new test series. This white paper seeks to describe some of the key differences between the old and new tests as well as bring to light ways in which these differences will impact the adult literacy field.

To date, the main impact of the new GED test has been to force adult literacy and basic education programs to seek new funding for the changes they need to make to help students meet the demands of the new test. As one example, the new test will be offered exclusively on computers at authorized testing centers. However, many local programs lack the experience or resources to teach computer literacy.

In the future, students will face two other challenges. New standards for test site certification may result in fewer sites administering the test, making it difficult for some students to get to test sites. The increased test fees may also be prohibitive for vulnerable populations.
While some specifics of the new test are still being finalized, a change to the GED test has been anticipated for years. In fact, the revision was originally scheduled for 2012, but the GED Testing Service® (GEDTS) pushed back the release in order to wait for the results of a college- and career-readiness standards initiative. To understand the trajectory of current and future changes to the test, this paper will review the history of the college and career readiness standards, the GED test development process, and the major changes to the GED test series. This paper concludes with a description of the avenues available to adult literacy providers who wish to make their voices heard around the new GED test.

In Minnesota, 53 percent of the high school class of 2008 enrolled in postsecondary institutions within two years—40 percent of them in developmental courses.¹ At the same time there are at least 3 million unfilled U.S. jobs reported every month because our workforce lacks the skills and credentials to fill them.²

HISTORY AND IMPACT OF THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

High school graduation requirements vary from state to state. When a student earns a high school or equivalency diploma in one state, colleges and employers in other states cannot be sure what skills and knowledge that diploma represents because there is no common set of standards by which graduates in every state are measured.

This problem is exacerbated by the fact that high school graduates and GED credential recipients are often not prepared for the demands of current jobs and postsecondary institutions. In Minnesota, 53 percent of the high school class of 2008 enrolled in postsecondary institutions within two years—40 percent of them in developmental courses.³ At the same time there are at least 3 million unfilled U.S. jobs reported every month because our workforce lacks the skills and credentials to fill them.²

This situation gave rise to a national demand for educational standards. Standards-based instruction has failed to remedy the crisis, in part because education is the responsibility of each state or territorial government. Thus states and territories each created their own standards, as did most national education associations. Navigating these competing sets of standards was unnecessarily complex, and the resulting curricula ranged widely in rigor.

Faced with increasingly difficult funding mandates and accountability requirements, a grassroots group of educators, parents, and academic leaders approached their chief school officers and governors to request that states cooperate to create a set of interstate-compatible standards for K-12. The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association (NGA) led the effort.

Input on the standards was solicited from a range of sources: educators from 48 states and two territories, employers, education experts, international benchmarks, and public comment. The college- and career-readiness standards are now known as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts and Mathematics. They have been adopted by 45 states and four U.S. territories, with various timelines for statewide implementation.

There are several elements of the CCSS that set them apart from other state standards. In English language arts, text complexity is increased at almost every grade level equivalent. In other words, reading passages rated at a tenth-grade level according to current state standards might now be considered ninth-grade level or lower using the CCSS. Content knowledge recommendations for literature, science, social studies, and technical skills are set by other subject standards, not by the CCSS.

CCSS sets the bar higher in mathematics as well. The emphasis is on strong foundational skills at the lower grade levels and on applying mathematical thinking to real-world problems at the high school level. The high school standards aim to better prepare students for college and career by using modeling to demonstrate how classroom math concepts can be used in everyday life. In addition, the standards focus on developing a depth of understanding that will set students up for success in college.
What impact will the new CCSS have on adult literacy programs? Adult literacy providers can refer to the standards to communicate when sharing lesson plans and assessments across state lines. Curriculum developers, publishers, and educational technology providers are already correlating materials to the standards and using them to explain their products to educators. These standards are like the system of interstate highways, allowing more efficient commerce.

Despite the interstate highway system, much transportation still occurs on local or state roads. So decisions about what to develop or maintain are still made on the local and state levels. This will also continue to be true of education. Local- or state-run programs will remain the main providers of adult literacy services. And those programs will continue to determine their own curricula and acquire their own curricular materials based on the various requirements of funding streams, reporting systems, state mandates, and other criteria.

Decisions about what to teach and how to teach it will still rest in the hands of individual adult literacy providers and programs. Since many funders require adult literacy programs to provide evidence of standards-based instruction and curricula, programs usually use standardized assessments to measure and communicate learner progress. The assessment targets for the new GED test are based on the CCSS as well as other career- and college-readiness standards, so publishers are heavily relying on the CCSS in developing curricular materials and assessments.

In the short term, adult literacy providers who decide to also align to the CCSS are anticipating a significant investment of time, funds, and expertise. Programs may have to purchase new instructional materials, and they may need to transition to online learning programs in order to best prepare students for the computer-based test. States or programs will need to revise curricula that were previously developed over the course of many years. And instructors will require training in the new standards and the resulting new curricula and assessments.
There is no way to know how long these investments will last. There is no sure way to predict how long it will be before the CCSS are revised or until another innovation of standards, curricula, or assessments comes along to again shake up the field of adult education.

GED TEST DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Traditionally, developments and decisions in K-12 education spur changes in the adult education field. As state K-12 school systems transition to CCSS-aligned materials, so will adult education programs. GEDTS is no exception. The 2014 GED test series focuses on a subset of the CCSS chosen as assessment targets. However, the assessment targets and test content are not exclusively influenced by the CCSS.

Other significant influencers of the assessment targets include the following:

- Norman Webb’s Depth of Knowledge model of cognitive complexity
- *Principles and Standards for School Mathematics* published by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics

The assessment targets represent what GEDTS calls a “foundational core of academic skills and content knowledge” that an adult needs in order to succeed in a job, training program, or entry-level postsecondary course. After creating the targets, GEDTS began to create test items that measure a person’s attainment of the target.

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skills and knowledge. All assessment items were assigned a level on Webb’s Depth of Knowledge model: 20 percent from level 1 (recall) and 80 percent from levels 2 and 3 (application and strategic thinking). Test items were then programmed into the technology-enhanced formats that test-takers will see on computer screens at the test centers.

GEDTS has completed several rounds of field testing on the new 2014 test items as well as the computer-based testing platform. The first field test in 2010 was a usability study to see how adults with varying computer skills interacted with a computerized GED test interface. The GEDTS used the results of the study to make more than 500 changes to the instructions, including changes in the placement of buttons and graphics, and to revise the question layouts to make them easier to use.

At the same time that GEDTS was developing test items for the 2014 test, states were transitioning to computer-based delivery of the 2002 test. Could test-takers perform as well on a computer-based version of the test as they do on the paper-and-pencil test? After a comparability study, GEDTS found no significant difference in scores between students taking the test on the computer and those using paper and pencil. The 2002 series is now being offered on the computer in 35 states and the District of Columbia. More than 30,000 GED tests have been delivered on computer. By the end of 2013, GEDTS expects all 50 states to be delivering the current test on computer, in preparation for the release of the new test in January 2014.

Computer-based testing opens the possibility of faster adaptation and accommodation, quicker results, and more variety in test item formats. To explore these additional possibilities, GEDTS conducted large-scale field testing in seven states. Field testing launched in seven states in 2012 and involved 50,000 representative sample test-takers. Once again, field testing resulted in a number of changes.4

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4 Details of these changes in delivery or explanation can be found in the November revisions to the GEDTS 2012 publication Assessment Guide for Educators.
Currently the results of the field tests are being used to decide standardized scoring for the exam. One of the most significant changes from the 2002 to the 2014 series is the introduction of typed critical responses. This approach eliminates the separate Writing section of the 2002 Language Arts test, which included one 45-minute essay. Instead, test-takers will complete four typed responses throughout the test—two short answers and two extended responses.

Qualified human specialists are scoring the typed responses from the field tests. The human-scored results are being used to train an automatic scoring engine. This engine will be able to provide results to test-takers within three hours, instead of a week or more, as was the case with human scoring on the 2002 test.²

GEDTS plans to release 2014 series GED practice tests in late November 2013. Before they can be released to the public, GEDTS is analyzing and validating the data it collected from field testing. Part of this process involves comparing the new test series to other high school graduation and college preparation exams, like the ACT and SAT. Just like the 2002 series, the 2014 series will also be field tested on a nationally representative sample of graduating high school seniors.

² “Update on the 2014 GED Test.” GED Testing Service Annual Conference, July 2012
The 2014 test item samplers are available on the GEDTS website (gedtestingservice.com) for educators. The samplers do not represent the range of question difficulty or the breakdown of item types, but they do showcase the new technology-enhanced test items (see the example in Figure 1). GEDTS is encouraging the use of these test item samplers in professional development for instructors and tutors. Publishers and curriculum developers are already using the test item samplers and other GEDTS publications to create GED test-preparation materials.

In addition to using a mouse, test-takers must be able to:
- scroll down a page,
- drag-and-drop answers to a graph or chart,
- navigate between tabs to read passages,
- type two short answers and two extended responses,
- use basic word processing tools,
- select answers or symbols from drop-down menus, and
- use a virtual calculator.

**FIGURE 1: STIMULUS**

Stimulus material will appear split into left- and right-hand panes or in one central window. The stimulus material may be “tabbed”—each tab representing pages or “screens” of material to be read.

Source: GED Testing Service, Introducing the 2014 GED® Test Item Samplers.
EFFECTS OF COMPUTER-BASED TESTING AND THE NEW FEE STRUCTURE

What will the computer-based GED test mean for adult literacy providers? Computerization of the test allows GEDTS to expand alternative response items on the test. In the 2014 series, the majority of test questions will remain multiple-choice items with four possible answers. However, all four sections of the new test will include a variety of other technology-enhanced items as well.

The GEDTS 2010 usability study gauged test-takers’ ability to use 20 different computer skills. The digital literacy skills required to navigate computer-based testing are similar to those used to browse the Internet, use word processing software, and complete online forms (see the example in Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: DROP-DOWN ITEMS

Drop-down items contain a passage that might have several drop-down menu boxes within it, each with several answer options. When a test-taker selects one of the options, that answer then appears as part of the text.

Source: GED Testing Service, Introducing the 2014 GED® Test Item Samplers.
In the Mathematical Reasoning section, test-takers can reference a formula sheet and use a digital calculator. Both the 2014 formula sheet and a demonstration version of the digital calculator can be found at the GEDTS website (www.gedtestingservice.com/educators/resources-educators) (see the example in Figure 3).

With the new test being delivered exclusively on computers, adult literacy providers must consider teaching computer skills in order to prepare learners for testing, if they have not already. Some adult literacy providers may have financial, institutional, or professional development barriers to technology integration.

**FIGURE 3: MATH TOOLS**

The Mathematical Reasoning item sampler shows how students will access the Formula Sheet and the Symbol tool, which allows test-takers to select mathematical symbols to use in fill-in-the-blank responses. Most questions on the Math test and some items on the Science and Social Studies tests will also include a link to the onscreen Texas Instruments TI-30XS scientific calculator and the Calculator Reference sheet, which shows how to use the calculator to perform basic operations.

Source: GED Testing Service, Introducing the 2014 GED® Test Item Samplers.
Increased testing fees are another major concern for both adult literacy providers and testing jurisdictions. The GEDTS will set 2014 rates to jurisdictions at a minimum of $120 and this may increase in future years. Jurisdictions can set their own rates for test-takers. Ohio, for example, has announced an initial $125 fee. Some states pay all or part of the testing fee in every case or for test-takers who pass the official practice tests. In other states, test-takers must pay directly.

To begin to understand how fees impact test-takers, GEDTS conducted a Consumer Value and Affordability Study. The results suggested that test-takers who were aware that there was a fee for the GED test were more willing to pay for it, regardless of the amount. Seventy-two percent of participants were willing to pay for the test, despite the fact that the majority had household incomes of less than $10,000 per year. Forty percent of participants said they were willing to take the GED test but would have to figure out how to pay for it.

The main reason for the increased cost of the 2014 series is a shift in the GEDTS organizational model. GEDTS was previously a nonprofit branch of the American Council on Education. In 2010 the GEDTS became an independent for-profit organization in close collaboration with educational publisher Pearson and computer-based test provider Pearson VUE.

Because of the new model, GEDTS has more motivation to protect the GED brand through marketing, customer service, and litigation. This has already resulted in a host of informative YouTube videos and litigation that closed 40 illegitimate organizations preying on prospective GED test-takers. However, some adult literacy providers and learners are concerned that the for-profit model may result in the GED test becoming inaccessible to some low-income test-takers.

There is a cumulative effect of increasing testing fees, requiring technology to prepare for computer-based testing, and aligning to the CCSS. The economic investment to prepare adult learners for the 2014 GED test series amounts to more than just short-term costs for transition. Computerized testing means that GEDTS will not have the same challenges to future revisions as with the previous paper-and-pencil tests. Providers may likely see smaller, more frequent changes to the GED test, similar to software updates.
Shifting to technology-enhanced, standards-aligned instruction will increase the long-term baseline cost of delivering GED test-preparation services. Programs will require increased funding in the short-term just to maintain quality and capacity for learners. Programs will need to plan for ongoing maintenance costs for professional development, technology consultation, Internet and physical security, assessment and software licenses, and equipment and hardware updates.

Some philanthropic foundations may step forward with pledges specifically to assist providers with this transition. These potential funds need to be matched by individuals and new allocations in state budgets. Unless there is a commitment from all available sources to increase long-term funding for adult literacy, the transition to the 2014 GED test may ultimately decrease the number of low-income students served. This would be unfortunate because both society and the economy benefit greatly when test-takers from all socioeconomic backgrounds pass the GED test.

**ADULT LITERACY PROVIDERS: A COLLECTIVE VOICE**

Adult literacy providers and learners have been vocal participants in the unfolding drama of the new test. Many are not even aware that their participation in email listservs, social media, conferences, surveys, and field testing are all valuable contributions to the field’s collective voice.

Instructors and administrators participated in the development of the CCSS and collaborated with the GEDTS in their rounds of field tests. In addition, they have contributed to studies related to the GED test by working with researchers in adult education, economics, and community development. Study participants—including field test-takers—make a difference in assessments, program design, policy, funding, and best practice recommendations.

Many adult learners and literacy programs recognize that participating in research and field testing is a mutually beneficial form of advocacy. Providers ask researchers and assessment developers to examine key issues for instructors and adult learners. Concerns about testing fees influenced GEDTS to conduct the Consumer Value and Affordability Study.
Advocacy organizations are a major channel for providers to make a difference. Many are very attentive to the interests and concerns of active members, especially during times of transition like the introduction of a new GED test series. For example, ProLiteracy has been gathering, disseminating, and responding to information about the upcoming changes to the GED test. Its publishing division, New Readers Press, is developing new student materials and professional development resources related to the 2014 GED test and targeted to the needs of ProLiteracy’s membership as well as other community organizations working in the adult literacy field.

Are you an adult literacy provider, learner, or supporter with questions, concerns, or feedback about the upcoming 2014 GED test? You are invited to contact ProLiteracy at info@proliteracy.org or (315) 422-9121. Or find us on social media sites: Facebook.com/ProLitWorld and @ProLitWorld on Twitter. Please participate as active members in the conversation.
RESOURCES

Presentations from 2012 Annual GED Testing Service Conference:
http://www.gedtestingservice.com/educators/2012gedtsconferencepresentations

Information by GED Testing Service for educators about the

New Readers Press GED Teacher Resource Center:
http://www.newreaderspress.com/ged/

New Readers Press 2014 GED Test Resources:
http://www.newreaderspress.com/2014test

ProLiteracy Member Resources: http://www.proliteracy.org/members

ProLiteracy’s Quick Guide to the 2014 GED Test:

EduCore®—Tools for Teaching the Common Core:
http://educore.ascd.org/

Videos—Explaining the Common Core State Standards by The Hunt Institute: http://www.youtube.com/user/TheHuntInstitute#g/u

The Teacher Channel—Free Common Core Lesson Ideas:
https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos?categories=topics_common-core

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ProLiteracy is the largest adult literacy and basic education membership organization in the nation. It works with
adult new readers and learners and with local and national organizations to help adults gain the reading, writing,
math, computer, and English skills they need to be successful. ProLiteracy advocates on behalf of adult learners
and the programs that serve them, provides training and professional development, and publishes materials
used in adult literacy and basic education instruction. ProLiteracy has 1,000 member programs in all 50 states
and the District of Columbia and works with 50 nongovernmental organizations in 34 developing countries.

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