

## **2009-1 Young GED Examinees and Their Performance on the GED Tests**

### **Abstract and Executive Summary**

#### *Abstract*

GED Tests offer many young adults who have left school a second chance to gain a credential, yet many educators have concerns about policies for very young test-takers and how they perform on the GED Tests. The GED Testing Service sets the absolute minimum age for taking the GED Tests at 16 years of age. However, an individual jurisdiction may establish its own minimum age requirement for testing as long as it is not lower than 16 years. In the United States, 43 states and the District of Columbia require candidates to be 18 years old to receive a GED credential. Most states, however, allow individuals younger than their required minimum age to take the tests with additional documentation. This study provides a comprehensive picture of young adults between 16 and 19 years old taking the GED Tests. What are their academic and demographic characteristics? And how do state policies on minimum age and use of the Official GED Practice Tests (OPT) influence their performance on the GED Tests? Study results show that younger GED examinees who needed additional documentation and approval before testing performed comparably on the tests to teenagers who met the states' standard minimum age requirements. The study also shows that states with stricter state age requirements may possibly encourage early test-takers to thoroughly prepare for the tests. In addition, the study suggests that taking and passing the OPT has a positive association with obtaining a GED credential.

#### *Executive Summary*

Rising numbers of recent high school dropouts are participating in adult basic education (ABE) programs. During the past decade, however, the percentage of youth ranging from 16 to 19 years old taking the GED Tests remained relatively stable at approximately 41 percent. This report focuses on GED candidates aged 16 to 19 years and aims to provide additional insight not found in previous studies about these young adults taking the GED Tests. It is important to note that the GED Tests are intended to meet the credentialing needs of adults, both young and old, who are already outside the K–12 educational system.

An individual jurisdiction may establish its own eligibility and minimum age requirement for testing and for awarding a GED credential as long as it is not lower than 16 years of age. The minimum age for taking the GED Tests varies from 16 to 19 years in the United States. However, most states allow individuals younger than their required minimum age to take the tests with additional documentation and requirements. In 2006, 56 percent of candidates aged 16 to 19 years old when tested were younger than their jurisdiction's minimum age.

The purpose of this study is to investigate characteristics of young GED examinees and how state minimum age policies affect their performance on the GED Tests. To identify the young GED examinees, the study examines the demographic, academic, social, and behavioral differences between GED candidates who were at the state minimum age and those who were under the minimum age but met the additional requirements.

Furthermore, the study scrutinizes differences in the completion rates, pass rates, and standard scores of both groups across jurisdictions. Research has shown that test preparation classes and practice tests are positively related to test results. The most reported test preparation activities prior to GED testing were public school/adult class, practice tests, and individual study (home study and self-taught). The study also examines the relationship between age group and preparation activities, including type of preparation, length of preparation, and use of Official GED Practice Tests (OPT). Finally, the study considers the role of the OPT for both groups in terms of passing the GED Tests and state prerequisites.

The data analyzed in this study were from the GED Testing Service International Database (IDB). The IDB contains candidates' demographic and test scores collected from official GED Tests electronic scoring sites. Candidates were first time test-takers in 2006. In addition, 2005 data were selected for analysis using the same methods for cross validation. Candidates in the dataset were categorized into two groups: (1) the exception age group, which included examinees under the state minimum age, and (2) the policy age group, which contained examinees at the state minimum age.

In 2006, a total of 196,912 candidates aged 16 to 19 years took the GED Tests. Nine of every 10 test-takers completed the test battery in the same year, and approximately eight out of every 10 of those passed the tests. These pass and completion rates are higher than those observed in the whole population of GED Tests candidates (86 and 69 percent, respectively).

As in other age groups, the majority of the young test-takers were male (60 percent). Fewer young minorities took the tests compared with the nationwide percentage. The most frequently reported grade the young candidates completed was the 11th grade for the policy age group and the 10th grade for the exception age group. Candidates in both groups reported similar reasons for testing, such as personal satisfaction, getting a better job, and educational advancement.

Overall, testing performance of examinees, as well as their completion and pass rates, was comparable for both exception age and policy age groups. These findings do not substantiate a common perception that young adults are not prepared to take a high school equivalency exam and that the youngest candidates would likely not do well on the GED Tests.

The probability of preparing for the GED Tests with an OPT was higher in the exception age group. A prerequisite of passing the OPT before testing, particularly for exception age candidates, may have a positive relationship with performance of GED candidates. Candidates in the exception age group were more than twice as likely to take the OPT than policy age candidates. In eight states where the OPT is required, the pass rate was higher for young candidates than in states in which there was no OPT prerequisite.

States with stricter age requirements may possibly encourage early test-takers to better prepare for the tests. More preparation may contribute to "evening out" the scores of candidates at exception age and at policy age. That is, exception age test-takers may perform comparably with policy age test-takers, despite the latter's extra year of high school, because of additional preparation. Evidence of additional preparation includes time spent preparing; exception age test-takers reported spending more time preparing. Median preparation time reported for the exception age group was 40 hours, and 25 hours for the policy age group. Median preparation time overall for those who reported preparing was 32 hours, ranging from one to 4,000 hours.

The findings of additional preparation have implications for policy, for instruction, and for stakeholders assisting dropouts to complete their secondary education. While a median amount of preparation time of 32 hours may not seem substantial in a typical secondary school setting, those hours are likely to pass much more slowly if the candidate studies at home around other activities or in a part-time adult education program. Furthermore, with a range in preparation time up to 4,000 hours, many candidates may find themselves taking months to prepare. High school and college counselors, judges, mental health-care providers, rehabilitation staff, and youth employment personnel need to be aware that the GED Tests offer a second chance but not a "quick fix" before they advise or mandate young adults to pursue a GED credential, considering the likely amount of preparation time for and the difficulty of the GED Tests.