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## Education

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## Dropouts Seek a Boost From Equivalency Exams

### *Numbers Seeking a Degree Swell -- But Gains May Be Limited*

By [S. MITRA KALITA](#) .

A growing number of Americans are taking high school equivalency tests in their hunt for any leg up in a bleak labor market.

Adult-education centers across the country report backlogs and waiting lists for prep courses cramming dozens of topics and years of lessons into weeks or months. But the potential for a better job and pay that drives many to seek a General Educational Development diploma comes with a caveat: The certificate generally is of limited value unless students use it as a stepping-stone to further education.

### Studying for the GEDs



Lee Celano for The Wall Street Journal

Roger McCoy worked on an essay in Garyville, La., Thursday.

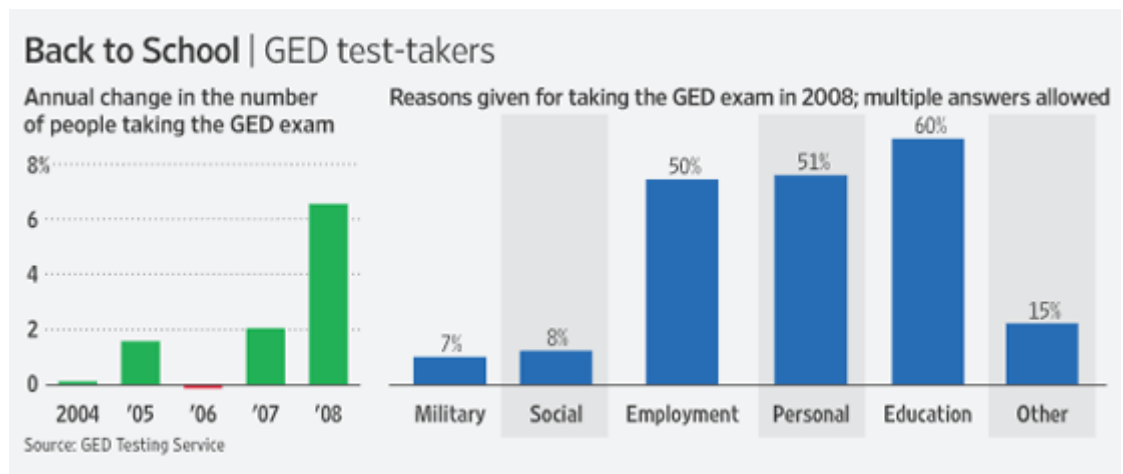
In 2008, the number of people taking the test for their GED diploma grew 6.6% to 777,000 from a year earlier, according to the American Council on Education, which administers the test. Between the first quarters of 2008 and 2009, three states -- Louisiana, New Hampshire and North Carolina -- and the District of Columbia saw at least a 20% rise in the number of test-takers.

The growth has come as the job market has worsened, especially for those with limited education. The unemployment rate in August for people lacking a high-school diploma was 15.6%, compared with 9.7% for high-school graduates without any college, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

During a recent job search, Karie Waugh, a 20-year-old high school dropout from Riverside, Calif., learned firsthand just how choosy employers, including grocery and drug stores, can be even for entry-level jobs. "I applied to a couple of places, but they wouldn't get back to me because I didn't have my diploma," she said.

Inspired by her older sister who passed the GED exam last year and landed a job as a sanitation-truck driver, Ms. Waugh enrolled in a prep course. She is scheduled to take the test next month and spends her days studying, going over and over just how to calculate a percentage.

The GED exam consists of tests in five subjects: reading, writing, social studies, science and math. The test, which can run nearly eight hours, is accepted by most colleges and universities in lieu of a high-school diploma. It can be taken free or with heavy subsidies in many states, but it can cost as much as \$100 in some states.



The test and preparation courses are available through institutions such as adult-education centers, churches and libraries. Companies such as Kaplan and Princeton Review also sell prep books and software.

At least two studies by economists show GED diploma recipients, on average, don't earn as much as traditional high school-only graduates, though those who use the test to access and complete college programs typically do benefit. In fact, a study comparing earnings of GED diploma holders without college to high school dropouts found little differentiated them in terms of income and employability.

"The GED's primary value is as a gateway to obtaining more valuable postsecondary training," said James J. Heckman, a University of Chicago economist and Nobel laureate. "This can serve individuals well in the long run, but unfortunately offers no quick fix for generating economic opportunity now."

Community colleges are trying to get more students without a high-school diploma to take the GED exam, with an eye on enrolling them after they pass. According to American Council on Education surveys, 60% of test-takers say they took it to pursue further education. About half said it was related to employment; respondents could list multiple reasons.

"Program providers and teachers are trying to get their clients to not use this as a terminal credential," said John H. Tyler, a labor economist and education professor at Brown University.

Corey Brown, 23 years old, earns about \$10 an hour as a forklift operator for a food warehouse company in Louisiana. He was expelled from high school in the 10th grade. Last year, he took the GED exam and passed all but the math section. So now he is hitting the books and plans to try again next month. He said a GED diploma would give him the option of applying to trade school, maybe to become an electrician.

The center where Mr. Brown is taking the course in Garyville, La., recently moved into a new building to accommodate growing demand for adult education. Program director Precious Joseph credits several factors for the turnout: technical colleges are better marketing the merits of the GED, and the sorry state of the labor market is propelling candidates to improve their chances of finding work. Louisiana saw a 47% jump in GED test-takers in the first quarter of 2009.

"There's a push within the work force to be certified in skills," Mr. Joseph said. "People are looking for and realizing they need some form of education."

Deluged with requests for prep courses, many centers in Georgia are backed up three to four weeks, but test dates are still available, said Kim Lee, director of the GED testing program for the Technical College System of Georgia.

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