

# Section 4: Outcomes of Participating in Adult Education

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## The Issues You Face

As a program administrator, you know that:

- ◆ Adult students and taxpayers care about the economic impact a GED has for the adult student and the community.
- ◆ You are accountable not only for students passing their GED tests, but also for helping them transition to postsecondary education and other training, and helping them to get and retain employment.
- ◆ You are accountable not just to federal and state funders, but also to students, local funders, the community in which your program is located, and other local stakeholders, and these constituents care not just about adults getting their GED, but about making improvements in adults' lives.
- ◆ Documenting educational gains and GED attainment are mandated measures of program performance and are a way to provide hard data to the state and federal government, but your students and program have goals and produce outcomes that the mandated measures do not capture.

NCSALL's research provides information to help you address these issues; specifically...

- The **GED Impact Studies** give you information about the economic impact of attaining the GED.
- The **Outcomes Studies** give you information about the impact of participation in adult education and literacy programs on students, their families, and their communities, as well as ways to assess this impact.

# The GED Impact Studies

## Findings from Research

A GED provides economic benefits only to low-skilled high school dropouts. There were no earnings differences between dropouts with and without a GED who left high school with high skills. However, among adults who left school with weak skills, those who earned a GED also earned 36% more income annually than uncredentialed dropouts with weak skills.

It takes time for the economic benefits of the GED to accrue, even up to five years, before measurable earnings differences appear. Those who left school with low basic skills, persisted to acquire higher skills, and passed the GED had, on average, a 15% gain in annual income after five years. However, earning a GED was not a path out of poverty. The average earnings of all high school dropouts from the GED Impact Study were very low. Whether this 15% raised the individual just above the poverty line or kept the individual below the poverty line depended on whether the individual was single or married, and whether or not they had dependents.

The returns on postsecondary education and training were as large for GED holders as for traditional high school graduates, but relatively few GED holders actually pursue postsecondary education. For GED graduates who earn a college degree, their earnings are the same as those who have a regular high school diploma and have

### About the GED Impact Studies

The NCSALL GED Impact Studies, conducted by John Tyler and a team of researchers, examined the economic impact of the GED for people who left school without graduating. The research uses large, specially-constructed data sets from several states that allow linking of GED pass rates to Social Security earnings, using a variety of research methods. Tyler and colleagues wanted to know what difference it makes for high school dropouts to earn a GED, and whether leaving high school with lower or higher levels of skill was a factor in how much income could be earned with and without a GED.

Tyler reviewed this NCSALL GED work, as well as the work of others that influence what is known about the economic benefit of the GED. The findings reported in this Sourcebook are from his synthesis published as ***The General Educational Development (GED) Credential: History, Current Research, and Directions for Policy and Practice*** (see Additional Resources at end of this section).

gone on for the same level of postsecondary education. However, very few GED graduates go on to complete a two-year college degree or more.

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## Specific Implications of the GED Impact Studies

**Implication:** *Encourage and support adult students with lower skills to persist in preparing to pass the GED test.*

**What the research says:** The GED leads to increased earnings gains for adults who left high school with weak skills (36% earnings increase among 27-year-olds).

**Therefore you should ...**

... focus on building skills, not just on getting as many students as possible to pass the test in as short a time as possible.

## Strategy

◆ **Help teachers develop a strong program for building the skills of pre-GED students,** and help adult students with weaker skills to understand why strong literacy skills are important.

**Implication: Help students plan for and acquire the skills needed to succeed in further education (postsecondary or training).**

**What the research says:** The returns on postsecondary education and training are as large for GED holders as for traditional high school graduates, but relatively few GED holders actually pursue postsecondary education.

**Therefore you should ...**

... encourage students to plan for postsecondary education and training after attaining their GED, and help them build the academic skills they need to succeed in postsecondary education.

## Strategies

◆ **At intake, make a clear statement that GED is not the terminal goal of the program.**

Share implications of the GED research at the orientation for new students. Help students see how your program is prepared to help them not only attain the GED, but go on to further education that will help them reap the full benefits of a GED. Talk about “*when* you go to college” instead of “*if* you go.”

◆ **Help students think about the literacy skills and credentials they need for particular careers,** and make students aware of the research on the financial benefits of postsecondary education. (The NCSALL teaching material, *Beyond the GED*,<sup>9</sup> provides lessons that address this topic while teaching basic academic skills.) Help them set goals toward that end. For example, perhaps a student needs some postsecondary education to benefit the most from the GED credential. Include setting goals for postsecondary education as part of the student’s plan.

◆ **Provide information on post-GED educational options in your area.** Encourage teachers to use this material as texts for academic instruction; for example, figuring the cost of a semester of training at various institutions as part of a GED math class.

◆ **Make strong connections to local postsecondary institutions or training facilities.** Ask these agencies to help you orient ABE and GED students to the opportunities their programs offer. If possible, hold some of your classes in their facilities.

◆ **Have supports in place for transition to postsecondary education and training.** Take students on a tour of colleges near your program. Invite admissions counselors from the college to give

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<sup>9</sup> *Beyond the GED* is available free from: [http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/beyond\\_ged.pdf](http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/beyond_ged.pdf).

## **Strategies** *(continued)*

an overview of the admission process, student support services, and financial aid. Invite a former student who has gone to college to come back and speak. (For more suggestions about building transition strategies, go to the National College Transition Network, [www.collegetransition.org](http://www.collegetransition.org).)

◆ **Work with teachers to create lessons for GED students that include academic vocabulary** and practice in completing the types of assignments commonly required in postsecondary education. In your program, use the language of college (*semester, academic schedule, syllabus, text, etc.*). Help students learn strategies for skimming and organizing reading assignments, for writing essays, and for advocating for themselves with college instructors and teaching assistants.

# The Outcomes Studies

## Findings from Research

*Analysis of data from the Tennessee Longitudinal Study identified a variety of positive outcomes reported by participants. Approximately one year after enrollment in adult literacy classes, students reported these outcomes:*

- An increase in rate of employment from 32% to 48%
- An increased overall satisfaction with their financial situation
- An overall increase in self-esteem (as measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale)
- Increased involvement in community (religious, parent-teacher, social/sports) organizations
- Positive changes in three of eight literacy practices examined (paying bills, working with numbers on the job, needing to memorize because of limited reading ability)
- Increase in the number of people who thought a book was a good gift for a child

*The qualitative life history study found that the outcomes of literacy program participation in students' lives were diverse, often complex, and determined by individuals' life situations. The changes that seemed to make the most significant differences in students' lives were:*

- *Changes from increased literacy skills.* Nine of the ten participants reported acquiring new literacy skills from their participation in adult literacy programs. For eight participants, these new skills in reading, writing, and computation led to changes in the ways they use literacy in their lives. These included:
  - Changes in the practical everyday activities of peoples' lives, e.g., filling out a money order
  - Changes in the ability to carry out work functions more easily

### About the Outcomes Studies

Three NCSALL outcomes studies led by Mary Beth Bingman explored the impact of participation in adult education and literacy programs on students, their families, and their communities, as well as ways to assess this impact:

#### **The Longitudinal Study of Adult Literacy Learners in Tennessee:**

The University of Tennessee Center for Literacy Studies (CLS) conducted the Longitudinal Study of Adult Literacy Participants in Tennessee to identify if and how participation in literacy programs impacted the lives of adults in four main areas: (1) socioeconomic well-being (jobs, income, survival); (2) social well-being (family and community life); (3) personal well-being (self-esteem, life satisfaction); and (4) physical well-being (health and access to health care).

#### **The Learner Identified Outcomes Study:**

Using a life history methodology to build an understanding of outcomes in the lives of adult learners, researchers selected and interviewed ten participants from the earlier Tennessee Longitudinal Study of Adult Literacy Participants. The primary source of data for this study was extended recorded conversations with the ten participants about their lives before and after enrollment in adult literacy programs.

#### **The Documenting Outcomes Study:**

Over the course of two years, three teams of teachers and administrators from three adult basic education programs in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia—with NCSALL researchers serving as facilitators—took part in action research (research conducted in a practice context addressing a problem of practice) focused on developing approaches local programs can use to document the outcomes of student participation in adult education programs.

- Becoming more involved in their children’s education
- Increased access to and understanding of expository text, i.e., text that conveys information
- *Changes in sense of self.* Four participants, two who passed the GED test and two who reported the most limited reading skills at enrollment, expressed a strong sense of accomplishment. Three participants talked about losing their sense of shame at being in a literacy class. Three participants reported a new and stronger voice or new opportunities to express themselves.

The action research on documenting student outcomes at the program level found that:

- Local programs can develop documentation processes useful for planning and assessing their work.
- Action research is effective for professional and program development in adult education.
- Action research is a tool to help students set and monitor goals.
- Action research focused on outcomes can enhance processes for improving program quality.

## Specific Implications of the Outcomes Studies

***Implication: Support varied outcomes of participation in adult education.***

***What the research says:*** Participants in adult education report and value a variety of outcomes from their participation in adult education. Their reasons for learning basic skills often include but go well beyond the GED, better employment, or postsecondary education. Through program participation, adult students are able to become more involved in activities that better their lives, often affecting the lives of those around them.

***Therefore you should ...***

...support student outcomes that extend beyond mandated measures of program performance.

### Strategies

◆ **Keep instruction organized around learning; do not let the program focus become centered solely on being accountable to federal policy.** Although you must comply with current accountability procedures, always begin and end with the adult student. Start with their participation goals and their broader purposes. Design instruction that involves the adult student in planning the activities in which they would like to participate to meet those goals. Keep the program’s focus always on students, teaching, and learning.

◆ **Contextualize instruction to real-life situations.** Encourage teachers to structure learning activities around the needs and concerns of the particular students they are teaching. (For more information and strategies about contextualizing instruction, see Section 1.)

◆ **Support a program mission that articulates how the program supports student outcomes beyond traditional program-performance measures.** Let program participants know what they might expect by participating in the program.

*Implication: Document and measure varied outcomes of participation.*

*What the research says:* Adults identify a wide variety of outcomes from their participation in adult education classes, and programs can develop ways to document these outcomes.

*Therefore you should ...*

... work with program staff and students to develop processes for documenting and measuring student outcomes.

## Strategies

◆ **Use action research** to identify ways to document a variety of outcomes; for example, to develop and test forms on which students log their reading to children. Action research provides data that programs can then use to assess and improve program quality. The process provides opportunities for developing leadership and building new skills for participants—both staff and students.

◆ **Survey various stakeholders in your community to find out the outcomes they care about and how they could use outcome data.** Consider the needs of various stakeholders, starting with the adults who attend your program. Start by reviewing the various stakeholder groups and the outcomes they care about:

- Students
- Congress: Workforce Investment Act (WIA), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), English Literacy and Civics Education Program, etc.
- State legislature
- Employers
- Health practitioners
- Higher education: admission standards and data on success predictors
- Taxpayers: community action groups, religious organizations, community-based assessments

◆ **Use instructional activities to document outcomes.** Work with teachers to help them design classroom reading and writing tasks that also document ways students think the program has helped them; for example, writing assignments on changes in goals or reading habits since enrollment.

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## Strategies *(continued)*

- ◆ **Periodically organize a small focus group of students in the program to discuss outcomes.** Focus on a few questions like “What can you do now that you couldn’t do before? Have you noticed any changes at home with yourself or family members?” and so on. Record and integrate results into a broader system of outcomes documentation.
- ◆ **Use or adapt strategies from *How Are We Doing? An Inquiry Guide for Adult Education Programs* to document and measure outcomes.** *How Are We Doing?* is a guide for developing local outcomes documentation that can help programs be accountable to their own constituents even if the documentation is not acceptable to their primary funder. (The guide can be downloaded from NCSALL at [http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/inquiry\\_guide.pdf](http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/inquiry_guide.pdf).)
- ◆ **Utilize Equipped for the Future (EFF) tools for both accountability as defined by adult education’s current system (learning gains by level) and accountability regarding students’ and programs’ varied goals.** The EFF Assessment Resource Collection (<http://eff.cls.utk.edu/>) describes the performance continua and level descriptors for the EFF Standards. Performance measures based on the continua can be used to determine progress (or level gain) on a variety of literacy skills. (See the “Guides” and the “ARC Library” for the level descriptors for 11 of the 16 EFF Standards and for information on how they were developed and how they can be used to design, as well as assess, learning.)
- ◆ **Contact your regional or state professional development and technical assistance center for support.** Find out if they can help facilitate the action research process. Seek resources and technical support.



## Additional Resources

To learn more about the Outcomes of Participating in Adult Education, go to: [www.ncsall.net](http://www.ncsall.net)

### NCSALL GED Studies:

◆ To read NCSALL Report #15, ***Cognitive Skills Matter in the Labor Market, Even for School Dropouts***, go to: <http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/report15.pdf>

◆ To see a synthesis report on GED impact studies, ***The General Educational Development (GED) Credential: History, Current Research, and Directions for Policy and Practice***, go to: [http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/ann\\_rev/rall\\_v5\\_ch3.pdf](http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/ann_rev/rall_v5_ch3.pdf)

◆ To see a *Focus on Policy* reviewing findings and policy implications about the GED research, go to: [http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/fop/v1\\_1.pdf](http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/fop/v1_1.pdf)

◆ To read summary research briefs on these studies, go to:

***The Economic Benefits of the GED: A Research Synthesis:***

[http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/brief\\_tyler1.pdf](http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/brief_tyler1.pdf)

***So You Want a GED? Estimating the Impact of the GED on the Earnings of Dropouts Who Seek the Credential:***

[http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/brief\\_tyler2.pdf](http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/brief_tyler2.pdf)

***Who Benefits from Obtaining a GED? Evidence from High School and Beyond:***

<http://www.ncsall.net/?id=658>

***The Devil is in the Details:*** <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=668>

***Estimating the Labor Market Signaling Value of the GED:***

<http://www.ncsall.net/?id=667>

◆ To see teaching materials on the GED studies, ***Beyond the GED: Making Conscious Choices About the GED and Your Future***, go to:

[http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/beyond\\_ged.pdf](http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/beyond_ged.pdf)

## **NCSALL Outcomes Studies:**

- ◆ To read the full report #11, ***Changes in Learners' Lives One Year After Enrollment in Literacy Programs***, go to: <http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/report11.pdf>
  
- ◆ To read the full report #13, ***"I've Come a Long Way:" Learner-Identified Outcomes of Participation in Literacy Programs***, go to:  
<http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/report13.pdf>
  
- ◆ To read the full report #20, ***Documenting Outcomes for Learners and Their Communities***, go to: <http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/report20.pdf>
  
- ◆ To see the program development guide, ***How Are We Doing? An Inquiry Guide for Adult Education Programs***, go to: [http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/inquiry\\_guide.pdf](http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/inquiry_guide.pdf)