

# The GED Matters

## Making Sure Maine Gets the Right Equivalency Test to Meet the Needs of Low-Income Adults Learners

By Christina Reinhard and Jody Harris

### Introduction

Mainers without a high school diploma do not fare well in the economy. They are stuck in low-paying jobs with little opportunity for advancement. They are the first to be laid off in a recession and the last to be re-hired in a recovering economy. Low-income Mainers have poorer health, they are unable to afford quality daycare, and their children do worse in school—all of which cause their productivity at work to suffer.

For Maine families where neither parent has a high school diploma, 54 percent live below poverty.<sup>1</sup> The median annual wage of a Maine worker without a high school diploma was \$18,557 in 2011, placing a GED candidate with two children at the federal poverty line of \$18,530.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, individuals with a high school diploma earn \$25,367<sup>3</sup> per year—nearly 40 percent higher—and they will earn \$200,000 more over a work life.

**Table 1: Maine Families without a High School Diploma are Mostly Low-Income<sup>4</sup>**

Number of Mainers without a HS diploma/GED	60,045
Percent of Mainers without a HS diploma/GED	7.1%
Percent of Maine Families without a HS diploma/GED that live in poverty	54%
Median Annual Wage of a Maine Worker without a HS diploma/GED	\$18,557
Federal Poverty Level (family with 2 children)	\$18,530
Median Annual Wage of a Maine Worker with a HS diploma/GED	\$25,367

### Background

The GED consists of five tests: math, science, social studies, reading, and writing. Currently, students take paper-and-pencil tests at one of 78 adult education centers across the state. These tests take seven hours in all to complete. When a student passes all the GED tests, Maine's Department of Education confers a diploma which is the legal equivalent of a high school diploma.

Maine provides free educational support and free access for adults to earn an equivalency diploma.

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**Table 2: Characteristics of Maine GED Students (2011)<sup>5</sup>**

Mean Age of Test Takers	25.2
Mean Years Out of School	7.3
Highest Grade Completed (Mode)	11th
Gender	Male: 58.4 Female: 41.6
Ethnicity	White: 85.4 African-American: 6.3 Hispanic: 4.4

In addition, Maine’s adult education system successfully provides quality programs that allow Maine adults to pass GED tests at a very high rate. In 2011, 86.9% of GED candidates who completed the GED test series passed all five tests. Of these, 91.5% were first-time GED test takers.<sup>6</sup> Before students take the GED, adult educators assess their learning needs and work with them to complete preparatory courses and tutoring. No Maine student can take the GED without this one-on-one help and, then, only when they are well-prepared and ready.

**Table 3: Maine Students’ Excel in Passing the GED<sup>7</sup>**

Number of GED Test Takers	2,598
Number Passed	2,258
Percentage Passed	86.9%
Passers Among First-time Candidates	91.5%

The GED version of a high school equivalency diploma (HSED) has benefits and drawbacks. It is tested and normed against high school standardized test scores. Additionally, all Maine community colleges and universities accept Maine’s GED-based equivalency diploma. On the other hand, the current version of the test is considered outdated. It does not incorporate common core standards<sup>8</sup> and, leaves GED recipients without computer or problem-solving skills insufficiently prepared for careers or post-secondary academics.

Aligning the GED’s focus with college and career readiness is an important element of the new career pathways structure for adult education that the Maine Legislature adopted in 2012 to achieve a smooth transition to postsecondary education and training.<sup>9</sup>

For many working adults, the first step in climbing toward a higher-wage job is to obtain a high school equivalency diploma. A well-crafted equivalency diploma will also help adult learners with further education and technical skills. Maine must continue to provide flexible and affordable opportunities for adult learners to earn a high school equivalency diploma. This will not only empower them to climb out of poverty, but it will also serve as the first milestone on a path to a higher-paying career and fill a need in a growing Maine economy.

## Changes to the GED

To modernize and upgrade the GED, the nonprofit American Council on Education (ACE), which has owned the test for 70 years, will transfer it to a privately-owned company, Pearson VUE. The new owner plans to update the tests to include computer literacy, problem-solving, critical thinking, and other content relevant to the contemporary jobs market beginning on January 1, 2014. Pearson VUE will bring the GED online, totally eliminating the familiar pencil-and-paper version. Going forward, the GED tests will incorporate common core standards and provide feedback to students on additional work needed to become college or career ready. The online test will cost more and require specific technology and new teaching content.

## Implications for Maine

To prevent any gap in access to HSEDs, Maine’s Department of Education (DOE) will contract with Pearson VUE and continue to offer the GED until the end of 2015.<sup>10</sup> As of May 2013, this contract is still in negotiation; however, the state has been piloting the new test and many of Maine’s adult education centers have already adopted the updated, online version.

**Table 4: The Timeline to Transition to the New GED Leaves Many Low-Income Mainers Behind**

ACE announces privatization of GED with Pearson VUE	March 2011
Maine pilots new GED tests	Spring 2013
Maine DOE contracts with Pearson VUE on interim basis	June 2013-December 2015
Maine DOE issues RFP for a HSED	June 2013 (anticipated)
Maine DOE selects vender for a HSED	August 2013 (anticipated)
Maine adult education centers must be upgraded and certified to meet Pearson VUE requirements	Spring 2013-December 2014
GED students in the pipeline must complete old GED tests	December 31, 2013
Pearson VUE’s new online GED tests begin	January 1, 2014
Maine’s adult learners take the Pearson VUE GED	Jan 1, 2014-Dec 31, 2015
Maine’s new contract for a HSED begins	January 1, 2016 (anticipated)

## Challenges

Pearson VUE’s changes to GED administration present serious obstacles for adult education instructors, adult education centers, and current GED candidates—especially low-income working adults. Concerns with the new GED include:

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**Stranded GED Candidates:** Current GED candidates have only a few months to pass all five GED tests prior to the end of 2013 or they must restart the series from the beginning with the new content and electronic format. Any tests passed in 2013 or earlier will not apply to a GED certificate for 2014. Applicants could have to repeat not only tests but also coursework completed prior to 2014 as they may not have received training needed to succeed on the new test's format and content. While adult educators are alerting students about the new GED deadlines, the narrow window is an obstacle to adult learners with competing job and family duties.

**Higher Test Cost:** Currently, the state pays \$40 per test cost for the GED series for all Maine residents as part of its commitment to provide free HSED access to a population that can least afford the cost. The price for the new private, computerized GED series will triple to \$120, and the state will have little control over future cost increases.

In the short term, Maine will continue to cover the increased GED cost with revenues in fees it will receive from Pearson VUE for administering the GED to certain non-state residents (federal prisoners, military personnel, etc.). It is unclear whether this arrangement will continue after 2015.

In 2011, almost 2,600 candidates passed the GED test series in Maine. In all, there were 3,741 GED candidates, not all of whom took or completed all the tests in one year.<sup>11</sup> Assuming 3,000 tests per year, at the price of \$120 each, the potential extra cost to state will be approximately \$240,000 per year, not including the costs of practice tests and other program upgrades—a major challenge to Maine's ability to provide free access to a GED in the future.

**Table 5: The New GED Poses Obstacles for Low-Income Mainers**

Stranded GED Candidates	Current GED candidates must pass all five GED tests prior to December 31, 2013 or start all over
Higher Test Cost	The current cost to take the five GED tests will increase from \$40 to \$120 for the suite.
Extra Program Costs	Adult education centers need new computer equipment, updated curriculum materials, and training and certification.
Fewer Test Sites	Adult education sites that are not upgraded in time cannot proctor exams, making it more difficult for test takers to find a site near them.
Inflexibility	Accommodations for adult learners with learning disabilities or those that lack computer proficiency are more restricted.

**Extra Program Costs:** Adult education centers must acquire approved computer and test surveillance technology to obtain certification from Pearson VUE. Pearson VUE trains and certifies test proctors. In some cases, meeting Pearson VUE standards will require alterations to test-taking areas, updates to adult education curriculum to align with new test content, and special training for adult education instructors to teach the new content. Again, all this must occur in just a few months for adult education sites to be ready by January 1, 2014.

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**Fewer Test Sites:** It is unclear whether all existing GED testing sites will be ready by January 1, 2014. The Department of Education has \$100,000 in its proposed, two-year budget (pending legislative approval) for technology upgrades, and some sites can use local budget funds for computer upgrades. Fewer sites would pose a hardship on low-income adult learners who lack transportation or who must miss work in order to travel to distant test sites.

**Centralization and Inflexibility:** Some of Pearson's test rules are too inflexible to meet the needs of Maine's adult learners. Adult learners who lack computer skills, for example, will have a more difficult time taking or even registering for tests online. This could restrict GED access for some, especially older learners. In addition, Pearson VUE's accommodation of adult learners with learning disabilities is restrictive. Many of today's adult learners with learning disabilities left school before diagnosis in traditional K-12 programs was routine. Diagnosis by a doctor or psychologist is prohibitively expensive. Additionally, even disability certification does not guarantee that Pearson VUE will grant a special test accommodation.

## Post-2015 Alternatives for Maine

There are many potential benefits to the state from continuing to offer the GED by contracting with Pearson VUE. By the end of 2015, the state will have tested the computerized GED series in Maine for two years and configured the adult education curriculum to include the new test content. Most transition issues will have been resolved and staying with the GED will preclude changing test content and curricula again after only two years. As long as the test suits the needs of Mainers, there will be a great advantage to retaining the GED instead of implementing an unproven alternative. Maine could possibly continue to subsidize the cost of the GED test for Mainers by extending the revenue agreement with Pearson VUE.

While Pearson VUE is known for rigorous testing protocols, the company has little experience with students who have time or income constraints or learning disabilities. In addition, with their high cost and inflexibility, Pearson VUE may not be the best option for Maine.

Several private and non-profit standardized test providers are developing computerized high school equivalency tests and testing services to compete with GED and Pearson VUE. Maine will be able to evaluate these options based on how well they meet the needs of its low-income population.

Two options will be ready to implement on January 1, 2014: the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC™) test and the High School Equivalency Test (HiSET™). Both alternatives are more affordable and flexible than the GED.

Table 6: Viable Alternatives to the GED

Test	Pros	Cons
<b>TASC</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Common core aligned</li> <li>• Paper-based test available</li> <li>• Less costly</li> <li>• Adopted by New York</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not tested in any state</li> </ul>
<b>HiSet</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paper-based test available</li> <li>• Less costly</li> <li>• Grandfathers students in process</li> <li>• Adopted by New Hampshire, Montana, and Tennessee</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not tested in any state</li> <li>• Not yet common core aligned</li> </ul>
<b>CASAS/ NEDP</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Geared toward working adults</li> <li>• Credit applied for existing skills</li> <li>• Career pathways focus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resource intensive</li> </ul>
<b>SBAC</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Geared toward college and career readiness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In testing phase only</li> </ul>

**TASC:** McGraw Hill, private provider of the well-known Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE<sup>®</sup>) and English language proficiency assessments, produced the TASC for high school equivalency testing. This test is common core aligned and offers a pencil-and-paper option as well as large print, braille, and audio. The \$54 basic per test cost is more affordable compared to the GED.<sup>12</sup> New York, which tests up to 50,000 adults per year, adopted TASC in March 2013 and will no longer offer the GED.<sup>13</sup>

**HiSET:** The Educational Testing Service (ETS) and the Iowa Testing Program, both nonprofits, have produced the HiSET test for high school equivalency. Like TASC, the HiSET has a paper-based option to allow states to transition to computerized versions more slowly and to accommodate special test needs of some adult learners. The \$50 per test cost includes two free retests in the same calendar year. ETS will align HiSET Phase 2 with the common core standards, and, importantly, allow grandfathering of students who have passed parts of the GED prior to 2014. New Hampshire, Montana, and Tennessee have already adopted HiSET.<sup>14</sup>

Although no state has yet implemented either TASC or HiSET, the service offerings appear much more aligned with Maine’s requirements. Both tests cost less than half the new GED and present much less uncertainty for keeping the test affordable to Maine adult learners. Further, both service providers appear to be more accommodating of local decision-making and of students with disabilities. HiSET even acknowledges passing GED test scores for students who have partially completed the test series so that they do not have to retake sections already passed. To make the transition proceed more smoothly in New Hampshire, HiSET will continue to make paper test options available where test centers are unable to make technology upgrades by January 1, 2014.

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Other educational testers with experience in career-focused adult education or adult education assessment include:

**CASAS:** The Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS) is a nonprofit test and curricula provider that offers a wide range of computer-based assessment tests, including Accuplacer®, which Maine’s colleges and universities already use to evaluate readiness for college level work. CASAS also has successfully implemented a career-focused, mentor-based high school equivalency program called the National External Diploma Program (NEDP). This program is not a traditional instructional program. Instead, it allows adults to demonstrate their high school level skills by applying their life experiences in real-life situations. It emphasizes professional work skills that better suit working adults.<sup>15</sup> The NEDP testing service assesses the skills of incoming candidates, and students receive credit for skills they have already acquired, avoiding unnecessary coursework. With its track record for educating adults for career success, a CASAS HSED option could be very attractive for adult education programs with a career pathways focus.

**SBAC:** Maine is a founding member of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), a state-led group working to develop assessments of student progress (grades 3-8 and 11) toward college and career readiness. In February 2013, SBAC launched a pilot program of its computer-based assessment, designed around the common core standards.<sup>16</sup> While a high school equivalency test is not currently available, Maine has legally adopted the common core standards for K-12 education and could align a Smarter Balanced test option with the state’s career and college readiness goals.

## Maine Department of Education Response

Since the American Education Council announced that the GED will be privatized, the Department of Education has been investigating the best options for Maine. The Director of Adult Literacy participates in weekly calls with directors in other states to explore new alternatives to the GED and the merits of other “off-the-shelf” GED alternatives.

To ensure there are no gaps in HSED availability, the department decided to use the GED test through the end of 2015, while simultaneously preparing a request for proposals (RFP) to consider competitive alternatives for after 2015. The department will publish the RFP this summer (2013). It will report back to the legislature’s Joint Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs in October 2013 on the outcome of the RFP process and its transition plan to a new testing service.

Once Maine has updated technology and test sites, adapted its adult education curriculum for new test content, and trained adult education teachers, the state’s future options will be limited. Given the effort and expense of gearing up for a new test, should GED test costs rise unexpectedly or unsustainably, it will be extremely difficult for the state to change testing services, locking Maine into the content and technology of the vendor it initially selects.

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The RFP is critically important as the last, best opportunity for Maine to address concerns surrounding the new GED, and to negotiate a testing alternative that meets the state’s requirements for low cost, flexibility, accessibility, and compatibility with Maine’s adult education model. It may well determine Maine’s future capacity to provide our low-income population with the skills they need to secure good jobs, provide Maine employers with qualified workers, and encourage a strong, growing economy.

## Considerations for an RFP

Overall the Maine Department of Education is well-positioned to ensure the best outcome for a Maine HSED. For the next two years, Maine will continue with the mostly widely-recognized option, the GED, at no additional cost, while it explores other options.

The department needs to devise an RFP for a test and testing alternative that best meets the needs of Maine’s adult learners who are mostly low-income. These Mainers typically face substantial work, family, and income considerations that constrain their education aspirations. They may also face transportation obstacles, lack of computer and study skills, learning disabilities, lack of experience with professional or academic settings, and other obstacles.

The department must consider its HSED decision in the context of Maine’s focus on adult education as the first step in a lifelong career and education pathway. Therefore, the HSED test must support the transition to career or college.

Consequently, the state’s RFP considerations must include these specific criteria (see Table 7):

**Table 7: Maine Bid Specifications Needed to Serve Low-Income Adult GED Candidates**

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1. Grandfathering of GED candidates who have passed parts of the GED prior to January 1, 2014
2. Affordable tests so that the state can continue to pay test costs
3. Widely accessible test sites that coincide with Maine’s current decentralized adult education program provision tied to local high schools
4. Workable accommodation of Maine’s successful individualized approach to adult education
5. Flexibility with physical characteristics of small rural adult education sites with limited staff and resources
6. Deference to localized decision-making with regard to students with learning disabilities or that lack computer proficiency (for example, paper-and pencil options)
7. Support students’ transition to career or college

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While Pearson VUE’s one-size-fits-all service and off-the-shelf test pose obstacles for Maine’s low-income adult population, Maine’s competitive bid process will require the company to demonstrate its capacity to offer affordable, workable solutions to mitigate the issues that concern Maine. If they don’t, Maine has other options to consider.



## Making a High School Equivalency the First Step of a Career

A GED is not the end point of adult education. The Maine Legislature recognized this when it enacted a career pathways model for the state’s adult education system and mandated alignment of adult education programs to achieve a smooth transition to postsecondary education and training.<sup>17</sup> A career pathways model supports adult learners to obtain credentials needed for family-sustaining employment and career advancement.<sup>18</sup>

Implementing a career pathways model requires adult educators to work with educational partners to provide the full range of services and supports adults need to succeed.<sup>19</sup> Maine is putting these pieces into place. Legislation enacted in 2013 requires the Maine Community College and University of Maine systems to establish credit transfer agreements to ensure that students who earn an associate’s degree from a community college can seamlessly progress toward a university baccalaureate degree.<sup>20</sup> The legislature also created a new scholarship fund to assist adults with prior education credits to complete their degrees and provided funding to expand high-demand community college courses (pending legislative budget approval).<sup>21</sup> The Maine College Transitions program provides counseling, mentoring, and support services to enable adults to transition successfully to college and earn degrees. The state also offers postsecondary assistance that pays for tuition and family supports like day care that help low income adults with work and family obligations to complete their degree.

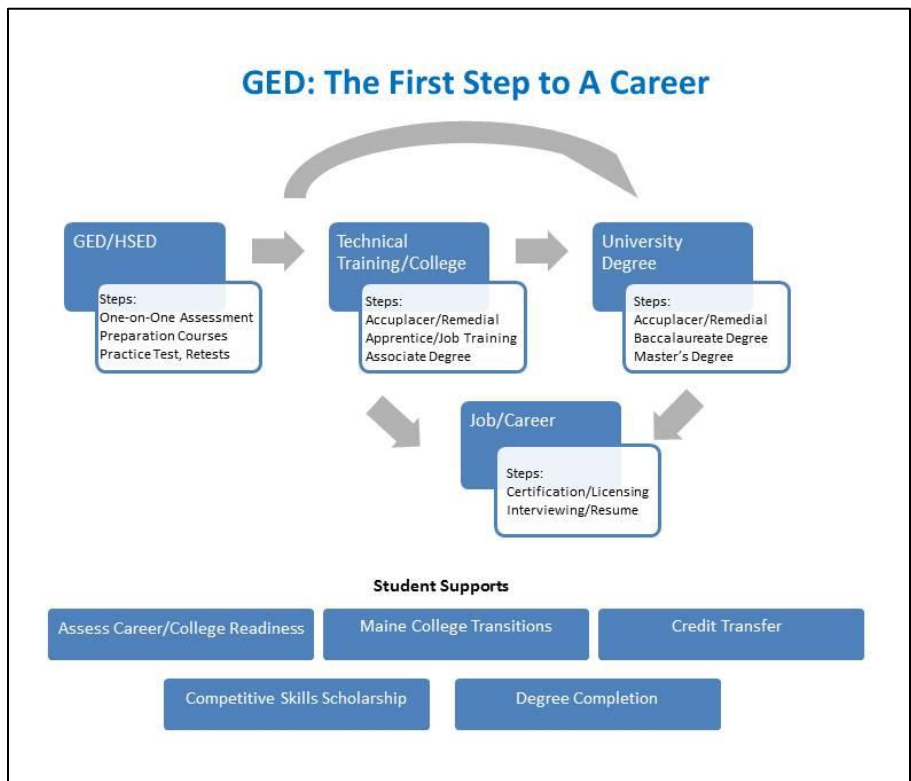


Figure 1: Steps Needed for Family-Sustaining Employment and Career Advancement

Building a career pathways-oriented system will require integration of all aspects of adult education, beginning with the GED. Regardless of which HSED test and testing service Maine chooses, its new content must reinforce Maine’s college and career transition goals.

### Conclusion

Maine’s enduring commitment to making a high school diploma accessible to those who need it most requires an equivalency test that does not impose barriers for low-income working adults. The HSED test must accommodate time, income, and learning constraints faced by low-income adult learners while preparing them for career and college. The 2014 GED makes needed content improvements, but it does not provide the flexibility to meet the needs of Maine’s adult learners, particularly because of centralized decision-making and inevitable higher future costs. Early information on the TASC and HiSET alternatives seems to indicate they may offer better flexibility and affordability.

Maine’s Department of Education is reviewing GED alternatives while testing the new GED in Maine and ensuring continued free access for Mainers to an HSED. The forthcoming RFP represents the department’s best chance to negotiate a test with the focus and flexibility Maine needs at a price that will keep the test free for low-income students. Choosing the right HSED test option as a complement to Maine’s already strong adult education system will further the college and career readiness of Maine’s low-income adult population and provide them opportunities for higher education and better-paying jobs. The income prospects of low income Mainers and their families and the future prosperity of Maine’s economy demand that we weigh all options carefully and choose wisely.

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### About MECEP

The Maine Center for Economic Policy (MECEP) advances public policies that help Maine people prosper in a strong, fair, and sustainable economy. MECEP advances this mission through high-quality research, analysis, citizen education, and coalition building. MECEP is an independent, nonpartisan organization founded in 1994.

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## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Working Poor Families Project, Conditions of Low-Income Working Families. “Percent of working families <100% of poverty in which no parent has some post-secondary education.” Population Reference Bureau, analysis of 2011 American Community Survey.

<sup>2</sup> Maine Economic Growth Council. Measures of Growth in Focus 2013. “Benchmark #9: 2011 Maine Median Earnings for Population Age 25 and Over by Educational Attainment,” March 2013; and U.S. DHHS 2011 Poverty Guidelines, See: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/11poverty.shtml>.

<sup>3</sup> Maine Economic Growth Council, Measures of Growth.

<sup>4</sup> Working Poor Families Project. Population Reference Bureau, analysis of 2011 American Community Survey and Measures of Growth in Focus, Benchmark #9 and U.S. DHHS 2011 Poverty Guidelines. See: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/11poverty.shtml>.

<sup>5</sup> American Council on Education. GED Testing Service. 2011 Annual Statistical Report on the GED® Test, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pp. 8, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Developed by a consortium of states, including Maine, the common core standards are designed to ensure that all students are prepared for success in postsecondary education (college, technical training, etc.) and the workforce. The standards are evidence- and research-based and internationally benchmarked to top-performing countries. See: <http://www.maine.gov/education/lres/commoncore/>.

<sup>9</sup> 125<sup>th</sup> Maine Legislature. An Act to Enhance Career Pathways for Adult Learners (LD 1780), 2012.

<sup>10</sup> The Department of Education decided to retain the GED at least until the end of 2015. Simultaneously, the department also decided to alter contracting procedures to conform to the state’s fiscal year. After the department synchs the contract year, all subsequent contracts will run from July through June and be one year in duration. Consequently, there will be multiple contracts covering the period 2014 to 2015.

<sup>11</sup> American Council on Education. GED Testing Service.

<sup>12</sup> McGraw Hill Education. Press Release. “CTB/McGraw Hill Launches the TASC, New High School Equivalency Assessment to Improve Accessibility and Affordability for Adult Learners,” April 29, 2013. See: <http://finance.yahoo.com/news/ctb-mcgraw-hill-launches-tasc-150000302.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Fain, Paul. Inside Higher Ed. Web site. “Testy Battle Over Tests,” May 16, 2013. See:

<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/05/16/ged-faces-competition-states-weigh-two-new-entrants>.

<sup>14</sup> Educational Testing Service. Press Release. “New Hampshire Joins Growing List of States Choosing HiSET™ Program to Replace the GED® Test,” April 15, 2013. See: [http://www.ets.org/newsroom/news\\_releases/hiset\\_new\\_hampshire](http://www.ets.org/newsroom/news_releases/hiset_new_hampshire)

<sup>15</sup> Clymer, Carol. Preparing for the New GED Test: What to Consider Before 2014. The Working Poor Families Project, 2012, p. 9 and pp. 13-14 and CASAS Website. See: <http://www2.casas.org/home/?fuseaction=nedp.welcome>

<sup>16</sup> Clymer, 12.

<sup>17</sup> 125<sup>th</sup> Maine Legislature. An Act to Enhance Career Pathways for Adult Learners (LD 1780), 2012.

<sup>18</sup> National Center on Education and the Economy. Guide to Adult Education for Work Transforming Adult Education to Grow a Skilled Workforce, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Maine Legislature. An Act to Strengthen Maine’s Workforce and Economic Future (LD 90), 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.