

Learner Retention in Adult Secondary Education: A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT

Learner retention in adult secondary education has been studied only with respect to the General Educational Development (GED) preparation program. This paper compares the retention of learners enrolled in the GED preparation program to those enrolled in two other adult secondary completion program options. It discusses why significantly higher levels of graduation and retention may not be attainable if the GED preparation program is the only option available to learners. It suggests that expanding secondary completion program options must become a critical policy-level strategy for improving learner retention. It also proposes a new longitudinal perspective of retention that is based on the continued participation of learners in future fiscal years.

and older did not possess a high school diploma. However, in the five years from 2001 to 2005, only about 2.2 million individuals nationwide passed the GED test (American Council on Education, 2005). If adult learners persist and succeed in other secondary completion programs at greater rates than in the GED, then increasing access to these varied options may need to become a critical priority of the national adult education community. An informal review of state adult education Web sites indicates that in at least 20 states, the only secondary completion option available to learners is the GED; 24 states offer some form of an adult credit diploma program, while learners in only 10 states have access to the NEDP.

INTRODUCTION

Several states offer multiple pathways for adult learners to attain their high school diploma. In addition to preparing for the General Educational Development (GED) exam, learners in those states can earn credits toward an adult high school diploma and/or demonstrate their high school level abilities in real-life tasks through the National External Diploma Program (NEDP) assessments. Despite these other options, the majority of research in adult education has studied learner retention only with respect to the GED preparation program (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999; Kerka, 1995; Reder, 2007).

According to Census 2000, over 40 million adults throughout the United States who were 18 years of age

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

This study will utilize data from Connecticut's adult education management information system (MIS) to compare the retention and graduation rates of learners in three adult secondary completion program options in Connecticut: (a) the GED preparation program, (b) the Adult High School Credit Diploma Program (AHSCDP), and (c) the NEDP.

The AHSCDP and NEDP diplomas can be earned only by attending an adult education program. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, learners who do not attain a high school diploma in the current fiscal year will be considered as retained only if their participation is evidenced through the MIS data in a subsequent fiscal year. This longitudinal

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perspective of retention differs from current approaches, where the benchmarks of learner retention span short periods of weeks or months (Belzer, 1998; Comings et al., 1999; Kerka, 1995) or utilize proxy measures such as the percent of learners who are pre- and post-tested for federal reporting purposes (Division of Adult Education and Literacy [DAEL], 2005).

This longitudinal perspective will also be used to analyze learner participation in the GED preparation program. Unlike the cases of the AHSCDP or NEDP, individuals can pass the GED and attain a high school diploma by preparing through self-study (Comings et al., 1999) without enrolling in an adult education program. Therefore, learners who do not persist with an adult education program based on this longitudinal perspective but attempt and pass the GED test will also be analyzed.

The following questions will guide this inquiry:

- How do the retention and graduation rates differ among learners in the three adult secondary programs, that is, the GED, the AHSCDP, and the NEDP?
- What percent of learners in these adult secondary programs attain a high school diploma in the fiscal year of their enrollment in that program?
- Of those learners who do not attain a diploma in the fiscal year of their enrollment, what percentage return to an adult education program in a future fiscal year? How do the returnees perform in that year?
- How do the retention and graduation rates of learners vary by age, ethnicity, and gender?
- When do most learners discontinue from adult education? Do most discontinue during the early weeks (Kerka, 1995; Quigley, 1998)? Do learners who “stop out” (Belzer, 1998) eventually return to adult education?
- What factors (e.g., program design, program processes, learner abilities at entry) might explain the differences, if any, among the retention and graduation rates in these three programs?
- What implications might these findings offer to learner retention initiatives? How might they inform current practice and future research?

AN OVERVIEW OF THE THREE ADULT SECONDARY COMPLETION PROGRAMS

The GED preparation program prepares learners for the high school equivalency examination, the GED test. Instruction may occur in a class that meets on a set weekly schedule, at a learning lab where instruction is typically individualized, or through individual tutoring sessions. The weekly intensities of the GED program may vary widely within and among providers from 3 hours a week to 15 hours a week or more. Classes typically allow learners to participate as they are able. Most adult education providers in Connecticut that receive funding through the State Department of Education offer GED preparation services. Individuals who successfully pass the GED test are awarded a high school diploma by the Connecticut State Department of Education.

The AHSCDP typically enrolls younger learners, under the age of 21, who are working to earn the high school credits necessary for graduation, though older learners are also enrolled. Connecticut State Statutes outline the basic credit requirements for this program. Unlike the GED, which is a test, the AHSCDP offers a prescribed plan, process, and structure for earning a minimum of 20 credits in academic and elective areas. The provider must be a local educational agency. In addition to classroom learning opportunities, credits can be earned through independent study projects, self-paced curriculum packets, and online courses. Credits can also be awarded for work experience, military experience, and community service. Each provider can enhance the basic AHSCDP program but must adhere to the minimum state requirements. State statutes and regulations require that teachers and counselors be appropriately state-certified. One adult education credit course must offer at least 48 instructional hours. A learner who successfully completes the local graduation requirements is awarded a high school diploma by the local school district. The AHSCDP is offered by 30 adult education programs, and these 30 programs serve over 140 of Connecticut's 169 cities and towns.

The third secondary completion option available to Connecticut's adult learners is the NEDP. The NEDP is an individualized portfolio assessment program that provides a secondary credential for adults who have acquired many of their secondary-level abilities through life and work experiences (Harvey, 1992). Adults who successfully complete the portfolio assessment are awarded

a high school diploma by their school district. Learners progressing through the NEDP assessments typically meet with an assessor once every week. This enables learners to establish a personal relationship with program staff. There is no classroom instruction, and learners can complete significant portions of the required work on their own time. In contrast to the AHSCDP and GED preparation services, the NEDP is currently provided to residents of about half of Connecticut's towns.

Both the AHSCDP and the NEDP incorporate within their program design several activities that support learner retention as suggested in current research. Learners in these programs are presented with self-study options (Reder, 2007), mastery experiences, incremental achievements toward the ultimate goal of a high school diploma (Comings et al., 1999), and counseling or mentoring supports. These activities to support learner retention are often not implemented consistently in the GED preparation program. Therefore, the AHSCDP and the NEDP serve as excellent "experimental" comparisons to the GED preparation program.

DATA COLLECTION

Connecticut's adult education MIS, the Connecticut Adult Reporting System (CARS), collects individual data on student demographics, entry status, goals, attendance, achievements, and test scores. The state has a long history of data collection in adult education. An MIS that tracks individual students has been in use since the early 1990s. Each adult education provider is expected to have a data administrator, who oversees data collection practices, and at least one data entry staff person, who inputs information. A complex array of warnings, error messages, and edit checks alert users to data anomalies and inaccuracies. Standard data collection forms and data definitions ensure consistency in the data that are collected (Connecticut State Department of Education [CSDE], 2007). Training is offered at least once annually to reinforce the policies and practices. As a result, the information collected through CARS has remained stable for several years and presents reliable data for such an analysis.

CARS establishes a unique state-level student record identifier. This practice enables the tracking of learners across fiscal years and between providers. If the student record identifier from one fiscal year is evidenced in the data of a subsequent fiscal year, then that individual is

considered as someone who has persisted longitudinally. Because programs report learner attendance through CARS on a monthly basis, the actual times of learner participation and exit are established using that attendance information instead of relying on self-reports, which are prone to validity problems (Condelli & Kutner, 1997).

The cohort of learners who enrolled in any of the adult secondary completion programs during fiscal year 2003–04 was selected for this study. Selecting this cohort allowed for an examination of their participation in three subsequent fiscal years: 2004–05, 2005–06, and part of 2006–07. Data for the last year were extracted on April 3, 2007, by which time almost 80% of the student data for that fiscal year had been entered. Learner retention in correctional programs may be influenced by factors that are quite different from those that affect adult education programs in general (Spangenberg, 2004). Therefore, 759 records of learners who were enrolled in GED preparation classes offered through the Connecticut Department of Corrections during fiscal year 2003–04 were excluded from this study.

METHODOLOGY

Learners were grouped into the following three categories for analyzing graduation and longitudinal retention rates:

1. **Graduate:** a learner who attained a high school diploma in fiscal year 2003–04.
2. **Nongraduate Returnee** (also referred to as **Returnee**): a learner who did not graduate in the fiscal year 2003–04 but returned to the same or a different adult education provider within Connecticut in at least one subsequent fiscal year (2004–05, 2005–06, or 2006–07).
3. **Nongraduate Exiter** (also referred to as **Exiter**): a learner who did not graduate in the fiscal year 2003–04 and did not return to any Connecticut adult education program in any subsequent year.

For the purposes of this paper, the graduation rate is the number of *graduates* expressed as a percentage of *all learners*. The retention or returnee rate is the number of *nongraduate returnees* as a percentage of *all nongraduates*. The rate of discontinuance or exit is the number of *nongraduate exiters* as a percentage of *all nongraduates*.

RESULTS

The retention and graduation rates of learners in the three secondary completion programs were vastly different (Table 1).

Fewer than 20% of the learners who enrolled in the GED preparation program graduated during the year. The GED program also reflected the highest percentage of exiters. Though some learners may “stop in” and “stop out” (Belzer, 1998), about 65% of nongraduates in the GED program did not return to adult education for up to three years. Of the 3,263 GED learners who left adult education in the 2003–04 fiscal year, 446 learners attempted the entire GED test over the next three years without preparing through adult education, and 204 passed the GED.

The AHSCDP and NEDP programs reflected almost the exact opposite. Nongraduates in these programs returned to adult education in a future fiscal year at almost twice the rate of those in GED preparation programs. About 63% of AHSCDP learners and 67% of NEDP learners who did not attain a diploma returned to adult education in a subsequent fiscal year. These rates of return are significantly higher than the continuing rate of 9% noted in the National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs (Young, Fleischman, Fitzgerald, & Morgan, 1995).

Annually, learners in the GED program attended slightly more than 40 hours on average, while those in the AHSCDP attended around 175 hours. The statutory credit

requirements of the AHSCDP make it necessary that adult education programs offer a broad array of courses each term or semester. GED preparation opportunities, on the other hand, may be more limited in scope. In the NEDP, each in-person meeting between the learner and the assessor is recorded as lasting approximately two hours. Annually, learners in the NEDP reflected more than 40 verifiable contact hours on average. NEDP learners complete the vast majority of their work through self-study between in-person meetings, but those hours are not reported.

Graduation and Retention by Age

Connecticut is one of several states that has seen an influx of young adult learners under the age of 25 into its adult education programs. Over the past decade, the AHSCDP in particular has evolved into an alternative educational opportunity in several school districts. As a result, only 15% of the learners in the AHSCDP were 25 years of age or older, while in the GED preparation program and the NEDP, the percent of learners who were 25 years of age or older was 43% and 73% respectively. Therefore, the graduation and retention of these older learners were analyzed separately.

The data reveal that the graduation and returnee rates for both younger and older learners were greater in the AHSCDP and the NEDP than in the GED preparation program (Table 2).

Table 1

Learner Retention and Graduation Rates for Three Adult Secondary Completion Programs—Fiscal Year 2003–04

Program	All Learners	Graduates % (N)	N	Nongraduates	
				Returnee % (N)	Exiter % (N)
GED	6,057	17% (1,017)	5,040	35% (1,777)	65% (3,263)
AHSCDP	7,330	27% (1,968)	5,362	63% (3,386)	37% (1,976)
NEDP	293	42% (122)	171	67% (114)	33% (57)

Table 2

Learner Retention and Graduation Rates by Age Category for Three Adult Secondary Completion Programs—Fiscal Year 2003–04

Age Category	Program	All Learners	Graduates % (N)	N	Nongraduates	
					Returnee % (N)	Exiter % (N)
Under 25	GED	3,430	21% (716)	2,714	38% (1,032)	62% (1,682)
	AHSCDP	6,261	27% (1,699)	4,562	65% (2,988)	35% (1,574)
	NEDP	80	29% (23)	57	65% (37)	35% (20)
25 and older	GED	2,627	11% (301)	2,326	32% (745)	68% (1,581)
	AHSCDP	1,069	25% (269)	800	50% (398)	50% (402)
	NEDP	213	46% (99)	114	68% (77)	32% (37)

The best outcomes for older adult learners were found in the NEDP, a program that is intended specifically for the older learner. In fact, older learners in the NEDP outperformed their younger counterparts. By contrast, older learners in both the AHSCDP and the GED preparation programs did not graduate or persist as well as their younger counterparts. The graduation rate for older learners in the GED program was 10 percentage points lower than that of younger learners. The returnee rate for older learners in the AHSCDP was 15 percentage points lower than that of younger learners. Anecdotal data from practitioners suggest that older learners sometimes dislike being in a class with “immature” young learners and might therefore disengage from adult education.

Graduation and Retention by Ethnicity

Both White and Minority ethnic learners in the AHSCDP and NEDP options reflected significantly greater

graduation and retention rates than similar learners in the GED preparation program (Table 3).

In the NEDP, over 70% of the learners were from Minority ethnic backgrounds, and they graduated at rates that were similar to that of White learners. Minority ethnic learners who did not graduate from the NEDP returned to adult education at greater rates than did White learners.

Graduation and Retention by Gender

Both male and female learners in the AHSCDP and NEDP options reflected far greater graduation and retention rates than those in the GED preparation program (Table 4).

In the NEDP, 79% of the learners in fiscal year 2003–04 were female, and their graduation rate was higher than that of males: 45% as compared to 31%. Since fiscal year 2003–04, however, the NEDP has expanded to more sites in Connecticut. In fiscal year 2005–06, about 28% of the enrollees were male (up from 21%), and these males graduated at about the same rate (49%) as females.

Table 3

Learner Retention and Graduation Rates by Ethnicity for Three Adult Secondary Completion Programs—Fiscal Year 2003–04

Ethnic Category	Program	All Learners	Graduates % (N)	Nongraduates		
				N	Returnee % (N)	Exiter % (N)
White	GED	2,632	27% (716)	1,916	31% (591)	69% (1,325)
	AHSCDP	3,048	31% (953)	2,095	63% (1,319)	37% (776)
	NEDP	84	44% (37)	47	55% (26)	45% (21)
Minority	GED	3,425	9% (301)	3,124	38% (1,186)	62% (1,938)
	AHSCDP	4,282	24% (1,015)	3,267	63% (2,067)	37% (1,200)
	NEDP	209	41% (85)	124	71% (88)	29% (36)

To maintain the readability of Table 3 and prevent it from being cluttered with excess data, learners are grouped into two ethnic categories: White and Minority. The term White (and not Caucasian) is used in order to remain consistent with the labels used by the U.S. Department of Education (DAEL, 2005). To minimize wordiness, learners who did not identify themselves as White are collectively referred to as Minority learners. Most of these learners identified themselves as either Black/African American or Hispanic/Latino.

Table 4

Learner Retention and Graduation Rates by Gender for Three Adult Secondary Completion Programs—Fiscal Year 2003–04

Gender	Program	All Learners	Graduates % (N)	Nongraduates		
				N	Returnee % (N)	Exiter % (N)
Male	GED	2,768	18% (503)	2,265	33% (749)	67% (1,516)
	AHSCDP	3,522	25% (878)	2,644	63% (1,664)	37% (980)
	NEDP	62	31% (19)	43	70% (30)	30% (13)
Female	GED	3,289	16% (514)	2,775	37% (1,028)	63% (1,747)
	AHSCDP	3,808	29% (1,090)	2,718	63% (1,722)	37% (996)
	NEDP	231	45% (103)	128	66% (84)	34% (44)

Entering Ability Level

Learners who graduated from the GED preparation program entered adult education with significantly higher abilities in reading and math as evidenced by their performance on the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System appraisal test (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System [CASAS], 2005). They reflected a CASAS scale score of 242 in reading and 227 in math at entry. With some remediation, especially in math, these learners have a very good chance of passing the GED test (CASAS, 2003; CSDE, 2008). Nongraduates (both returnees and exiters), on the other hand, scored 235 and 219 in reading and math, respectively.

In the AHSCDP, learners who entered with higher abilities in reading and math on the CASAS appraisal test graduated at greater rates. Of learners with adult secondary level reading abilities, 33% (DAEL, 2005) graduated, as compared to 23% of all other learners; the corresponding numbers for math were 40% and 26%, respectively.

There was little difference in the reading abilities at entry among NEDP graduates, returnees, and exiters. The average math abilities of exiters in the NEDP were about 3 CASAS scale score points lower than those of returnees or graduates.

Incremental Achievement

The GED preparation program offers learners only one goal, the ultimate goal of passing the GED test. Among the 26 providers that served 50 or more students, the average returnee rate was 36%. The provider that achieved the best returnee rate of 50% was one that, instead of preparing learners to tackle the entire GED examination (of over seven hours) in one sitting, guided learners to study for and pass the GED one subtest at a time. Such a partitioning of the ultimate goal can make the GED test seem more attainable to some learners. However, even this approach does not provide learners with incremental achievements toward the GED test for demonstrated learning in the

program because the only standard that matters is actually passing that GED subtest.

Conversely, in the AHSCDP, each full or partial credit earned for completing coursework brings learners gradually closer to the total number of credits required to achieve the diploma. The data revealed stark differences in course completion rates among graduates, returnees, and exiters. Graduates enrolled in more than five courses earned credit in about 90% of those courses and attended over 242 hours during the year. Returnees enrolled in about five courses earned credit in 51% of those courses and attended about 150 hours. Exiters enrolled in more than three courses earned credit in only 31% of those courses and attended about 81 hours on average. These data demonstrate that even returnees and exiters enrolled in many courses, but they experienced limited success. Therefore, completion of the first one or two courses can be an early indicator of longitudinal learner retention.

Learners in the NEDP took incremental steps toward the diploma by successively completing the various portfolio tasks. The high rates of graduation and retention evidenced in the NEDP demonstrate that these progressive achievements helped learners to persist and complete the entire assessment.

Retention of Nongraduates: The Early Weeks and Beyond

Some researchers have deemed the first few weeks as the critical period (Quigley, 1998), when a majority of learners discontinue from an adult education program (Kerka, 1995). This is somewhat akin to the minimum participation threshold of 12 hours established by the U.S. Department of Education as a criterion for selecting students for federal reporting (DAEL, 2005). The retention of nongraduates from Table 1 was analyzed based on their attendance for at least 12 hours (Table 5).

The GED preparation program had the highest percentage of learners with fewer than 12 hours of

Table 5
Retention of Nongraduates by 12 Hours of Attendance

Program	N	Fewer Than 12 Hours			12 or More Hours		
		Total	Returnee % (N)	Exiter % (N)	Total	Returnee % (N)	Exiter % (N)
GED	5,040	1,323	29% (380)	71% (943)	3,717	38% (1,397)	62% (2,320)
AHSCDP	5,362	809	45% (368)	55% (441)	4,553	66% (3,018)	34% (1,535)
NEDP	171	44	48% (21)	52% (23)	127	73% (93)	27% (34)

attendance. Moreover, about 71% of those learners never returned to adult education. In the AHSCDP and the NEDP, fewer learners attended less than 12 hours, but a significantly greater percentage of these learners returned to adult education.

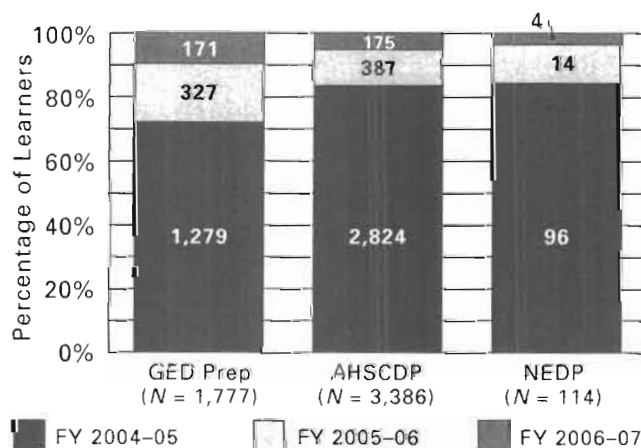
Among learners who persisted for 12 or more hours, the returnee rate improved significantly in the AHSCDP and NEDP programs. In the GED preparation program, however, over 60% of nongraduates who stayed for 12 or more hours failed to return to adult education. About half of these learners even attended over 30 hours. The early weeks continue to represent a period when many learners discontinue from the GED program. However, it is evident that a significant number of learners also stop attending after persisting past the early weeks and making a concerted effort to pass the GED test.

Year of Return

A great majority of nongraduates who returned to adult education did so in the immediate next fiscal year, 2004–05 (Figure 1). Far fewer learners returned after stopping out (Belzer, 1998) for a year or two.

Figure 1

Year of return.



Performance of Returnees

So how do returnees fare in the year in which they return? The performance of nongraduates from fiscal year 2003–04 who returned in fiscal year 2004–05 was analyzed. In the AHSCDP, 32% of returnees attained a high school diploma, while 23% of learners newly enrolled in fiscal year 2004–05 graduated. In a program where learners can take incremental steps toward their high school diploma by progressively accumulating high school credits, they seem to benefit from

persisting into a subsequent fiscal year. In the NEDP and GED programs, returnees from fiscal year 2003–04 were 2% to 3% more likely to graduate in fiscal year 2004–05 than new learners who started in fiscal year 2004–05.

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that three different secondary completion programs with three very different structures, pathways, student expectations, student supports, statutory requirements, and instructional intensities produce dramatically different rates of retention and success. Regardless of age, ethnicity, or gender, learners who were enrolled in the AHSCDP and NEDP reflected far greater graduation and retention rates than those in the GED preparation program.

Program Design

The GED preparation program, which has the least requirements or structures, reflected the lowest graduation rate and the highest exit rate. Learners with stronger abilities in reading and math at intake were most likely to pass the GED test. Those who discontinued from adult education were learners who made an effort but realized that they may need significant basic skill remediation, often in the areas of math and writing, if they were to pass the GED.

Helping learners to prepare for and pass the GED exam one subtest at a time can make the GED test seem more attainable to some learners. However, incremental achievements for demonstrated learning in the GED preparation program do not count toward passing the GED test because the only standard that matters is actually passing that test. Programs could create alternate stepping-stones for learners at lower ability levels who seek the GED. For example, they could highlight the increasing probabilities of passing the GED test at each higher CASAS level (CASAS, 2003; CSDE, 2008) and then utilize learner progress on CASAS pre- and post- assessments as incremental achievements toward GED readiness.

Unlike the GED program, the AHSCDP presents learners with a clear pathway to graduation and demonstrates significantly greater retention and graduation rates. Returnees in particular benefited from continuing with the AHSCDP in a subsequent fiscal year because each small success in the coursework contributes toward the attainment of the high school diploma. The broad array of course offerings also ensures that learners in the

AHSCDP attend significantly more hours. As with the GED, learners who entered with higher abilities in reading and math graduated at greater rates.

Learners who discontinued from the AHSCDP experienced limited success in their coursework. Therefore, instead of prescribing a full course load to all learners, counselors should develop course loads and recommend course topics that will enable learners to experience success early. These counseling decisions should consider not only the credits that learners need to graduate but also their entering abilities in reading and math. AHSCD programs may also need to place stronger emphasis on orienting new students to program practices and expectations in order to perpetuate a culture of success. Of the 29 providers that served 50 or more students, the highest returnee rate achieved by a provider was 82%.

Among the three adult secondary completion program options, the NEDP demonstrated the highest graduation and retention rate, especially among older learners from Minority ethnic backgrounds. It appears to demonstrate better outcomes for some of the following likely reasons:

- Intake assessments ensure that only those learners who are able to perform the NEDP tasks are admitted to the program.
- The NEDP presents learners with adult-appropriate challenges to demonstrate their secondary-level abilities and allows for considerable self-study (Reder and Strawn, 2001) that is highly structured.
- Learners are able to demonstrate their abilities through authentic portfolio-based assessments (Comings et al., 1999). Moreover, prior to the start of the program, learners are expressly presented with the particular competencies that need to be demonstrated in order to complete the entire program; there are no surprises. Learners are also expected to self-assess their proficiency on those competencies. Being forewarned about the specific competency expectations and knowing that on-site assessments will check for mastery of those competencies encourages learners to be honest through this self-assessment process and accept responsibility for the learning and the outcome.

- Learners receive one-on-one support and feedback from assessors who guide their progress through the program.
- Completion of each NEDP task brings learners that much closer to completing the program.
- An added incentive to complete the NEDP for learners in Connecticut may be that they will receive a local high school diploma, while individuals who pass the GED receive a state-issued high school diploma.

Though many learners cease to attend during the early weeks (Kerka, 1995; Quigley, 1998), this study demonstrates that, especially in the GED program, many also discontinue after making a significant investment of their time in adult education. For this reason, it may be important to periodically re-evaluate learner progress toward the ultimate goal of attaining a diploma (Comings et al., 1999; Meader, 2000), acknowledge the interim successes achieved, and reaffirm commitment to the longer-term goal. It may also be appropriate to consider an alternate high school completion option during these times of re-evaluation. For example, a learner in the AHSCDP who needs 15 credits to graduate but is proficient in the basic skills may be able to pass the GED test sooner.

Multiple Adult Secondary Completion Options: A Policy-Level Strategy for Learner Retention

In spite of the best efforts of practitioners, not one of the 26 GED preparation programs with 50 or more learners could produce a returnee rate better than 50%, while 27 of the 29 AHSCDP providers with 50 or more learners and 5 of the 6 NEDP providers with 10 or more learners attained that same threshold. The AHSCDP and the NEDP also reflected better retention rates among older learners and learners from Minority ethnic backgrounds.

While it is true that this study did not test the implementation of research-recommended strategies to improve retention in GED preparation programs, the differences in graduation and retention rates between the GED and the AHSCDP and NEDP are considerable. The following program design elements in the AHSCDP and NEDP cannot be replicated within the GED preparation program:

- Incremental achievements that include earning credits for coursework in the AHSCDP or completing assessment tasks in the NEDP contribute directly to the attainment of the high school diploma; the only standard that matters in the GED is passing that test.
- In the AHSCDP and NEDP, learners can demonstrate knowledge through alternative approaches such as portfolio-based assessments or independent study projects, alternatives that are unavailable in the GED option.

These inherent differences in program design and the resulting difference in the outcomes strongly suggests that higher levels of graduation and retention may not be attainable if the GED preparation program is the only secondary completion option available to learners. Without multiple options, local program staff may have no choice but to offer GED preparation services to all learners seeking a high school diploma. For many of those learners, an alternate secondary completion program may be more appropriate and provide them with a greater likelihood of success.

Therefore, creating multiple options for adult secondary completion within a state and program must become an important strategy for improving learner retention and success. This will require state-level policy makers to move beyond their administrative and governance roles to become policy leaders (Chisman, 2002) who create a more comprehensive educational landscape for learners. They will need to advocate for the creation of new secondary completion options, draft the necessary legislation, articulate policy for their consistent implementation, and offer sustained high-quality professional development and technical assistance.

A Longitudinal Perspective of Learner Retention

Researchers and practitioners use the term *stop out* when referring to adult learners who are no longer enrolled in a program. Conventional wisdom and anecdotal information have suggested that learners who stop out eventually return to adult education and should therefore not be called “dropouts” (Belzer, 1998).

However, the data, especially in the GED preparation program, demonstrate that a vast majority of the learners who did not attain their diploma did not just stop out, but left adult education; few learners returned to adult education after a one-year absence. Though it may be preferable to call learners “stopouts” and not “dropouts,” the data require a new definition of retention within programs that is based on a longitudinal perspective. Instead of considering a learner who is in attendance after four months as being persistent (Comings et al., 1999), this new definition of retention should expect the tracking of continued attendance into the next fiscal year and hold programs accountable for such longitudinal participation. Without this emphasis on longitudinal retention and tracking, local providers may rely on the incorrect assumption that all nongraduate exiters are simply stopping out and will eventually return to adult education. Short-term retention for a few months or high rates of persistence on proxy measures such as post-test rates can deceive practitioners into falsely thinking that their programs are retaining a large percentage of their learners.

CONCLUSION

This study compared the success and retention of learners in the AHSCDP and the NEDP, two secondary completion programs that incorporate several activities that support learner persistence (Comings et al., 1999), to the success and retention of those in the GED preparation program, where such retention supports may not be implemented consistently.

The data demonstrate that learners in the AHSCDP and NEDP persist and graduate at far greater rates than those of learners in the GED preparation program. The data also strongly suggest that significantly higher levels of graduation and retention may not be attainable within the GED preparation program. Therefore, expanding adult secondary completion program options must become a critical strategy for improving learner retention. This will require leadership roles from state-level administrators (Chisman, 2002) in order to create legislation, articulate policy, and offer professional development. The Adult High School program model can provide a comprehensive educational option for learners seeking to earn credits in a broad range of academic and elective areas toward their high school diploma. The NEDP offers great promise, especially

for older learners from Minority ethnic backgrounds. States like Connecticut that offer these multiple options must ensure that they are accessible to all residents and not limited to learners in some programs or towns. Any cost-effectiveness comparisons among the three options must account for their widely varying retention and graduates rates. For example, in addition to analyzing the cost per person served, such comparisons must also consider the cost per graduate.

Until such multiple options are available, programs that offer only GED preparation can improve learner retention by

- presenting learners at lower levels with a pathway to the GED
- enabling learners to experience small successes early
- offering supports that help learners to manage the positive and negative forces that help and hinder persistence (Comings et al., 1999)
- providing alternate goals, such as workforce readiness or mastery of lower CASAS levels, for those at significantly lower abilities
- periodically re-evaluating progress toward the goal of earning a diploma

A new definition of learner retention that tracks continued participation in future fiscal years is also needed. State and local data management systems must

be capable of tracking longitudinal learner participation so that programs can be held accountable for such persistence as a separate measure (Comings et al., 1999).

Having the capacity to offer the three secondary program options is only the beginning. Future research could develop and test criteria that programs with multiple options could utilize during their intake processes to ensure that learners are referred to the option that is best suited to their goals, interests, motivation, and basic skill ability levels.

New research is needed to compare the long-term effectiveness of these three program options in preparing learners for postsecondary education and employment. Do AHSCDP and NEDP graduates enter postsecondary education, complete college, and achieve earnings at rates that are similar to or better than GED graduates?

Administrators in states that offer multiple secondary completion options and where reliable longitudinal data are available can conduct similar research to test the findings from this study.

Online learning, especially hybrid learning environments that combine mentored online learning with program participation, present great potential for increasing the retention and learning of students in programs without requiring their physical presence in a classroom. Future research should study the effect of such virtual efforts, especially for learners who may not have otherwise returned to adult education in the next fiscal year.

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