

The Minnesota Adult Secondary Credential:

A Student-Centered Strategy for Workforce Readiness and Individual Prosperity

A Report from the Minnesota Adult Secondary Credential Task Force, July 2012



Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
A Unique Opportunity to More Effectively Serve Adult Students.....	4
The Current Context for Adult Secondary Credentialing in Minnesota.....	6
Relevant Populations and Key Stakeholders.....	10
Research Findings.....	11
Student achievement.	12
Limitations inherent in the GED-based approach..	15
Implications for developmental education.	15
Approaches in other states.....	17
Minnesota foundations..	18
Recommendations for the Adult Secondary Credential.....	20
Statewide authorization, consistency and operational impact.....	20
Academic, career, and personal/professional preparation	22
Academic skills and assessment tools..	23
Career readiness skills and assessment tools..	26
Personal readiness attributes and assessments..	28
Strategies for Implementation	30
Refining the proposed model.	30
Engaging key stakeholders.	31
Conclusion: Potential Benefits of the New State Credentialing Approach	33
Appendix A	35
Reference List.....	35
Task Force Membership.....	37
Appendix B.....	38

Executive Summary

In late 2011, the Minnesota Department of Education requested that the Literacy Action Network (LAN)¹ form a task force comprised of leaders from the ABE community to examine the issue of adult secondary credentials and develop a report with recommendations for future action. After reviewing the various adult secondary credential models currently in use in Minnesota or other states, as well as the alternatives under consideration elsewhere, the Task Force offers a comprehensive design for a new framework with multiple options for adults to secure a high school equivalency credential. This new framework preserves access to the GED but embraces a more comprehensive approach better aligned with adult learning context and need, as well as broader competency assessment choices that address both achievement and workplace preparedness gaps. Adults who choose the new competency-based option will have a

Adults who choose the new competency-based option will have a more clearly defined opportunity to demonstrate evidence of academic, career and personal competencies needed for success in further education and training or employment.

more clearly defined opportunity to demonstrate evidence of academic, career and personal competencies needed for success in further education and training or employment. This

report is offered to help inform public policy initiatives that facilitate this competency-based option.

This report is the culmination of the first phase of the Task Force's work. Securing adoption and application of the competency-based adult secondary credential across Minnesota is the focus for the Task Force in the coming months.

¹ See <http://www.literacyactionnetwork.org>

A Unique Opportunity to More Effectively Serve Adult Students

Across the nation, educational institutions are scrutinizing new and innovative approaches that customize program and service delivery to better meet the learning styles, context and needs of adults. From redesign of traditional credit for prior learning and college-level equivalency exams to a restructuring of the GED test, adult education programs and post-secondary institutions are embracing a variety of new approaches that enhance adults' acquisition of essential academic content and workplace skills. This trend exemplifies the heightened relevance of the adult student cohort to the nation's economic competitiveness, and

also aligns with public-private

partnership efforts intended to address income, opportunity and achievement gaps that persist in communities across the United States.²

Many of these new initiatives recognize that effectively measuring adults' skill and achievement levels depends more on careful assessment of academic, career and life competencies, as opposed to a single

Serving Chris

Chris is a Native American male from northern Minnesota who dropped out of school during the last semester of his senior year, succumbing to peer pressure from gang members. He passed all of his state exams and completed all the required courses to graduate; he just needed 2 elective credits. By age 23 he'd broken the gang connection. After working for 2 years in a custodial position, he learned the reason he'd been passed over 3 times for a supervisors' position was because he lacked a secondary credential. When he attempted to enroll in the area learning center, he was informed he would be required to sit in classrooms with 15-18 year-old students (many of them gang members) for 7 hours a day until his computerized curriculum was completed. This scenario wasn't feasible because it interfered with his work schedule, and he didn't want to reconnect with gang members. His only option was to complete his GED, or give up on obtaining the promotion to supervisor. Acquiring the GED testing fee is a significant barrier for Chris. He works for minimum wage and pays child support for his two children—and spends 35% of his income on housing, with virtually nothing left from his weekly paycheck.

York and California) have passed legislation that outlines specific conditions in which adults (age 21 and over) can be granted a high school equivalency diploma.

test score or interview result. Educators that primarily serve adult students know that these students bring different skills and competencies to the classroom, thereby demanding approaches to curriculum, instruction and support that differ significantly from the traditional K-12 model. In other words, merely applying the typical K-12 method for measuring competence—the standardized test—to adult students overlooks the unique attributes that these students bring to the learning process.

Similarly, for those adults who do not possess a high school diploma, limiting their options for demonstrating competence to the GED test often constrains their ability to move forward in their academic, career, and personal development. For adult students, a ‘one size fits all’ model ignores the rich experiences and learning potential that can be better assessed through

Minnesota is confronting a significant gap between the skill level of current and future employees and employer expectations for workforce readiness. Carnevale (2010) found that there is a gap of nearly 30% between the educational preparation and skill level of the current workforce and the expected level of preparation that will be needed by the year 2018. Developing an alternative adult secondary credential that measures academic, work and life experience better prepares adults for the workplace, and encourages higher levels of civic engagement, academic inquiry, and family literacy.

alternative credentialing methodologies.
Developing an alternative adult secondary credential that measures academic, work and life experience

better prepares adults for the workplace, and encourages higher levels of civic engagement, academic inquiry, and family literacy.³

³ Research in Wisconsin indicates that adults often need many months (18 is common) to complete preparation for and actual GED testing before transitioning into subsequent occupational training that is part of a career pathway design. This research also indicates that GED attainment alone has a marginal economic impact, above the high school dropout level but below that of the average high school graduate. Thus, the traditional GED-centered high school equivalency diploma does not lend itself to a sufficiently rapid progression for adults who need to be reattached to the labor market.

Minnesota is confronting a significant gap between the skill level of current and future employees and employer expectations for workforce readiness. Carnevale (2010) found that there is a gap of nearly 30% between the educational preparation and skill level of the current workforce and the expected level of preparation that will be needed by the year 2018. More than 250,000 Minnesota adults need to secure a high school diploma or its equivalent to be considered ready for initial employment or for the advanced post-secondary education and training necessary for expanded employment potential. Moreover, since employers increasingly emphasize the importance of academic, career, and personal readiness to the effective performance of job tasks and congruence with workplace culture, adult credentialing options must measure a broader array of skills and signify more depth and breadth than standardized test scores typically reflect.

In other words, for Minnesota to meet the needs and expectations of employers—and to offer individuals a meaningful opportunity for initial and subsequent employment with advancement potential—careful analysis of policies and practices that support adult credentialing opportunities and workforce readiness must routinely occur. This fundamental shift in the way employers view work readiness is a primary factor driving this examination and analysis of Minnesota’s existing adult secondary credential framework, and the accompanying recommendation for a new approach that better aligns with adult learning context and needs as well as emerging employer expectations.

The Current Context for Adult Secondary Credentialing in Minnesota

In addition to the heightened need for aligning adult credentialing with workforce readiness, there are significant changes taking place within the GED testing marketplace that impact the traditional way Minnesota has offered alternative high school diploma options to

adults. Responding to the national debate about college readiness and student success, the GED Testing Service/PearsonVue announced changes to the test's scope and content. The new exam aligns with common core content standards announced by the U.S. Department of Education, and would measure student achievement at a higher level to better comport with expected levels of student performance in rigorous college coursework. PearsonVue also announced a new pricing strategy that may increase the cost of the test and eliminated the paper and pencil testing option, requiring test administration to be computer-based starting in 2014.

Asking the approximately 10,000 Minnesota adults who annually take the GED to do so at a higher cost is potentially exclusionary, given the fact that many test-takers are persons living in poverty or with otherwise limited financial means. And, as noted above, standardized testing provides a limited option for adult students to demonstrate their performance. This impacts the success rate of adults, many of who have been away from formal education for an extended period of time, or experience high levels of test-taking anxiety.

Perhaps more fundamentally, however, the test-based approach to alternative secondary credential acquisition for adults who do not have a high school diploma does not respond to the heightened need for academic, work, and personal readiness essential to meet employer expectations for a highly skilled workforce. Exploring alternatives that result in better-prepared adult credential-holders addresses testing and work readiness concerns, and potentially places Minnesota in a position of national leadership on these issues.⁴

⁴ An example of this approach is the National External Diploma Program (NEDP), designed to meet the needs of adults seeking a non-traditional method for seeking a high school diploma. The NEDP framework emphasizes mastery of competencies demonstrated at the high school level of proficiency in simulated real-life situations. The program relies on self-directed learning and encompasses the individual's life experiences. This approach recognizes that some adults do not do well on high-pressure standardized tests, but have skill levels and knowledge better displayed in other formats. The NEDP is currently offered in nine states.

Deploying a student- and work readiness-centered approach to alternative adult secondary credentialing will distinguish Minnesota from most of the other states that are considering options to the new GED testing scheme. New York is considering an alternative to the GED test, either developed internally or in partnership with other states. Georgia is looking for legislative or community (philanthropic) support to defray the increased cost of the GED, as are most other states; in the absence of expanded subsidies, they will be forced to pass on the increased testing costs to individual students. Only Wisconsin appears to be working on a career pathway-based approach that is based on the multiple options that currently exist within that state for adults to secure a secondary credential equivalency.

ABE and college representatives are exploring ways to reposition ABE instruction as a more effective alternative to enrollment in college developmental education courses for adults who need additional brush-up support prior to taking a college readiness exam.

Minnesota and Wisconsin share several strengths as they approach modification of adult secondary credential options. First, adult basic education (ABE) providers in both states have begun to focus more intentionally on work and college readiness, in partnership with college and workforce systems through the Joyce Foundation's *Shifting Gears* initiative.⁵ This work results in a heightened awareness of the foundational college and work readiness preparation offered by ABE through bridge programs, contextualized curricular content, and content delivery adapted to the unique learning style of adults. In addition, both states offer multiple adult diploma options as alternatives to the GED, although in Minnesota these options lack statewide consistency since they are authorized locally by school districts, with many districts not choosing to offer alternative adult diploma options (Wisconsin achieves consistency by establishing statewide options pursuant to state law).

⁵ For more information on Minnesota's FastTRAC and Wisconsin's RISE initiatives, see <http://www.shiftinggears.org>

Finally, ABE and college representatives in both states are exploring ways to reposition ABE instruction as a more effective alternative to enrollment in college developmental education courses for adults who need additional brush-up support prior to taking a college readiness exam (such as the ACCUPLACER, COMPASS, ACT or SAT). Blending college readiness with basic skills assessment as part of an alternative secondary credentialing process seamlessly aligns credential acquisition with preparation for college, potentially reducing or minimizing time and cost barriers to subsequent post-secondary enrollment for many adults.

Given the significant impact of the proposed GED changes—and the complexity of the analysis of policy and practice impacting adult secondary credential alternatives, workforce preparedness, and college readiness—the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) requested that the Literacy Action Network (LAN) form a task force comprised of leaders from the ABE community throughout Minnesota to examine the issue and develop a report with recommendations for future action. The Adult Secondary Credential Task Force began its work in February 2012, meeting six times to examine the current adult secondary credential landscape in Minnesota and other states; examine the impact of the proposed changes to the GED; research credentialing alternatives, considering both instructional and policy implications of an array of options; and developing a set of recommendations to guide subsequent development of a strategy to advance an alternative adult secondary credentialing strategy. All of the Task Force's sessions were facilitated and supported by the consulting firm of SheridanStowe LLC.

This report represents the culmination of the first phase of the Task Force's work. The document contains analysis of a specific proposal for an alternative adult secondary credential option for Minnesota. The report also considers actions to build awareness of this proposal and preliminary strategies to develop a policy advocacy agenda needed to secure necessary changes

in state law to authorize consistent statewide delivery of this new option. A more thorough examination of the implementation steps needed to secure broad support and legislative approval for the new adult credential option will take place during the second phase of the Task Force's work during July – December 2012.

Relevant Populations and Key Stakeholders

Data collected and maintained by the Minnesota Department of Education shows that there is an extensive pool of Minnesota adults who can benefit from alternative approaches to secondary credential acquisition. The adults who would potentially be served by the competency-based option come from a wide array of learner groups: first generation learners completing high school; young adults (ages 21-25) who were 'left behind' in their high school experience; individuals living in poverty; persons of color (many of whom are affected by Minnesota's achievement gap, which is among the nation's largest); refugees and immigrants; and individuals with physical, emotional/psychological or learning disabilities. When adult learners fall into multiple categories, there is an obvious need for a competency measurement

methodology that acknowledges the fact that adult students do not usually fit well into a 'one size fits all' approach.⁶

With their high school equivalency in hand, these adults in

Kathy's Story

Kathy is a 23 year-old, African-American, single mother of one. She came to Southeastern Minnesota from another state to seek education, employment and a better life for her daughter and herself. Kathy enrolled in the Family Literacy project of an ABE program. Her goals were completion of a secondary credential and obtaining employment. Kathy had some high school credits but needed intensive instruction in math, reading and writing. While discussing her employment goal, Kathy revealed that she had never lived in a household where anyone had ever been employed. She joined an employment readiness class. Within one month of completion of the readiness class, Kathy was employed, full-time with benefits, at a large hotel. This was a partial victory because it was not possible for her to continue in Family Literacy or to attend ABE classes regularly. At this time, she is still employed and has passed two parts of the GED exam. Kathy has proven her competency as a mother, as a worker, and as a life-long learner. None of these competencies can be documented on a standardized test.

is in Minnesota that were analyzed by the Task

turn form a crucial resource with latent talent and availability for Minnesota employers to tap into as they implement strategies that address the state's looming credential gaps. In other words, more adults holding a secondary credential equivalent means more adults with the skills and attributes needed for employment or related post-secondary education and training.

Research Findings

The field of adult learning has long been the focus of theory and research as educators address the unique challenges/opportunities of this population. The critical nature that education plays in a democracy was defined in foundational work presented by Dewey. Mezirow described the complexity involved in meeting this need for an educated society in his work addressing the transformative dimensions of adult learning. This research stressed the importance of breaking out of the learning boundaries set by society, teaching adults to reflect and understand how their assumptions, beliefs and life experiences impact the choices they make and directions they take. Another aspect of this complexity was examined in the work of Lisa Delpit that looked at the challenges involved with educating low income and culturally diverse populations.

Any examination of the field of adult learning quickly exposes the failure of a one-size-fits -all approach.

Much of this work was reviewed, analyzed and expanded upon by Brookfield

as he championed the role of critical thinking in adult learning. Moreover, any examination of the field of adult learning quickly exposes the failure of a one-size-fits -all approach. The segment of the adult population not well served by the traditional educational model and seeking to acquire an alternative high school diploma is a highly diverse group. This group often comes with the potential barriers of low income, ELL, disabilities, experiences of discrimination, and

the refugee/immigrant experience. Coupling these issues with a wide range of traditional educational preparation and experiential learning (both domestic and foreign) presents challenges for the design and implementation of an alternative high school diploma option.

Research findings identify key elements that are essential components of any successful diploma design. Adult students must be engaged where they are, providing credit for existing successful completion or mastery of skills. There is a need to develop integrated approaches to learning and using assessment as a learning process. Moving these ideas to practice will provide the pathways necessary for these adult students to attain the alternative high school diploma and become ready for employment or to pursue additional educational opportunities. The essential nature of this work is validated by relevant academic research and scholarly analysis, serving as the foundation for the development of a framework for success as described in the ensuing narrative.

Student achievement and workforce readiness gaps. In Minnesota as in other states, significant gaps exist between the demonstrated academic achievement levels of Caucasian students and students from underrepresented and underserved groups. Students of color, low-income learners, first generation students and English language learners all demonstrate achievement levels that fall below those of their counterparts from traditional learner segments. These gaps persist through both elementary and secondary education, and frequently accompany adults who return to ABE programs in pursuit of a high school equivalency credential. Investigating alternative approaches to curriculum development, instruction and assessment that are better suited to the learning styles of adults becomes a key task for alternative credential analyses intended to eliminate achievement gaps and prepare adult students for the anticipated rigors of college study as well as the expectations of the modern high-skill workplace.

To illustrate the scope of the adult secondary credentialing opportunity in Minnesota, the Task Force examined current data (2010-11) on adult participants in ABE and GED programs (2011) across the state. For the most recent year that data is available, 74,847 adults were enrolled in adult basic education (ABE) throughout Minnesota.⁷ This learner cohort is extremely diverse, reflecting multiple ethnicities and cultural backgrounds, with gender-based participation levels varying by racial or ethnic group (for example, women predominate in the Asian, black/African American, and Hispanic/Latino groups, while males enroll at a higher level within the American Indian and white groups). The great majority of learners are between ages 25 and 44, and data confirms that most come from low-income backgrounds and households. In 2011 9,698 individuals were tested through the GED program. These individuals were attempting to qualify for further education (5,426), qualify for employment (5,161), or qualify for military enlistment (269). Approximately 61% of the participants were male. Of the 6944 persons completing the entire battery of tests, 83% achieved a passing score. These results support the necessity of retaining the GED option for the segment of the population that is well served by this approach.

⁷ This data encompasses all adults who received at least 12 hours of instruction in any of these three programs. Source: Minnesota Department of Education database and annual Federal reporting documents. <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/StuSuc/AdultEd/index.html>

In addition to the persistent gaps in achievement that impact adult students' preparation for college work, there are similarly troubling gaps in the overall preparation of employees for the high-skill jobs that increasingly distinguish the Minnesota workforce. Carnevale and Rose (2011) described the existing and emerging credential gaps in core industry sectors across the upper Midwest, including precision manufacturing; information technology; and health care. By 2018, 80% of jobs in Minnesota will require a post-secondary credential. The breadth of competency assessment needed for alignment with industry expectations highlights the importance of addressing measurement of adults' personal readiness for the contemporary workplace as part of an alternative credentialing option. Workplace readiness is usually defined to include possession of a credential that verifies technical skill attainment, as well as communication, computation, problem-solving, digital literacy, collaboration and analysis competencies.

By 2018, 80% of jobs in Minnesota will require a post-secondary credential.

Additionally, employers in Minnesota and elsewhere consistently regard the possession of non-academic, personal 'success skills' as an essential requirement for initial and continued employment. These skills typically include cultural competence; conflict resolution; the ability to balance work and family issues; maintenance of health and sobriety; good attendance and workplace engagement; and such essential attributes as reliability, honesty, trustworthiness and respect.

Test-based credentialing approaches do not reliably assess these non-academic skills that adult students frequently possess in good measure. Alternative approaches that embrace such assessment concepts as capstone projects, collaborative learning, and portfolio development can offer a more comprehensive and accurate measurement of the personal success attributes to

complement academic and career skill assessments in an alternative adult credentialing framework.

Limitations inherent in the GED-based approach. In Minnesota as elsewhere, the GED has traditionally been viewed as the primary alternative for adults to acquire a secondary credential. As educators who work with adult students know firsthand, a standardized test frequently does not effectively or comprehensively assess learning competency for all learners. Language differences, test anxiety, time away from formal learning, fear of technology, and the content limitations of the exam all can contribute to a testing result that is an incomplete measure of the adult student's level of content mastery and potential for future academic or workplace success.

Moreover, since the GED test traditionally measures core academic content only, its utility as a measurement of potential college or work success in specific disciplines or programs is similarly limited. Perhaps most importantly, this test is not pertinent to the assessment of the personal success attributes that most employers consider essential for initial hire and career advancement. In other words, one size does not fit all, and the standardized testing option does not serve all adults who pursue a high school equivalency credential.

The GED will continue to be an adult secondary credentialing option in Minnesota for those students who are comfortable with a computer-based standardized testing approach. Other states are exploring alternative options as well. However, it does not appear that many states are considering a student-centered, employer-responsive array of alternatives that embrace testing and alternative competency assessments.

Implications for developmental education. In Minnesota as in most other states, students who are not ready for college coursework typically are directed into developmental

education courses upon enrollment at the two-year college level. In addition to the increased time and resource obligations facing students who must enroll in developmental education, data from the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system (MnSCU) indicates that increased numbers of students and course sections results in a tremendous cost impact for the system, estimated at \$30 million for direct instructional expenditures and nearly \$60 million in total cost for FY2009.⁸ Of this cost, approximately half of the instructional cost (\$15 million) is supported by student tuition proceeds.

Within the MnSCU system, most developmental education enrollments take place within the two-year colleges, which are a primary post-secondary access point for adult students across the state. These developmental courses typically cover mathematics, writing and reading competencies needed for successful participation in college-level program and major courses. Students test into these courses based upon their score on the standardized computer-based Accuplacer test, which is required of all new college students by Board policy. As a consequence, many adults spend considerable time and money taking developmental education courses prior to any enrollment in program or major-related coursework.

MnSCU data indicates that underrepresented (students of color, low-income/Pell eligible, first generation) and female students are more likely to take developmental courses. Once enrolled, the impact of developmental education on student persistence and overall success is mixed and unclear. For some students, developmental education is clearly a detriment to steady progression to a degree award. For others, enrolling in short-term certificate or diploma

⁸ Data and information contained in this section is drawn from the February 2012 developmental education overview prepared by the MnSCU System Office. This information covers students who are first-time college enrollees who have been admitted on a full-time basis only. Note that this is acknowledged as a serious limitation of the underlying MnSCU study and analysis. See http://www.academicaffairs.mnscu.edu/asa_admin/conferences/Documents/Presentations - Dev Math Conf/Presentations_2012.html

programs without participation in developmental coursework can lead to better persistence and completion rates.⁹ Overall, only eight percent of students pursuing an Associate degree who were required to enroll in developmental coursework persisted to receive their degree within five semesters of two-year college coursework. It appears that developmental education impacts the time and cost associated with successful college persistence and degree completion, and does not in many cases positively impact overall student success rates.

The implications of developmental education for the adult secondary credential analysis are clear. Enrollment in developmental coursework adds time and cost for adult students, many of whom do not have additional time or funds to devote to extended periods of study.

Credentialing options that accelerate college readiness activities in the context of assessing and evaluating adults' prior academic, career and life experience should promote better college readiness that is acknowledged as a credible alternative to extended enrollment in developmental coursework. For adults interested in obtaining an entry-level certificate or diploma in a specific career pathway, MnSCU data already indicates that developmental coursework presents an additional barrier to successful receipt of that occupational credential.

Approaches in other states. A survey of other state approaches to adult secondary credentialing alternatives completed by the MDE ABE office in January 2012 revealed mixed practices across the nation. Although several states--like New York and Wisconsin--are actively engaged in exploring alternatives to the GED, most states are just beginning to consider their options. Legislative changes that both amend authorizing statutes and designate new funding

⁹ For both Associate degree and certificate-seeking students, those who were not required to take developmental coursework (e.g. those who have the required Accuplacer score or those who enroll in programs through customized training or some other portal where testing policies appear not to apply) graduate at significantly higher rates (e.g. Associate degree 8% vs. 23.2%; certificate, 42.3% vs. 60.1%). Source: MnSCU developmental education overview, February 2012.

streams are anticipated in many of the states that responded to the survey. Test-based alternatives (such as a new standardized alternative to the GED or a proxy score on the ACT exam), career pathway related designs, and alignment with state common core requirements appear to be the most common approaches under consideration.

New York has received considerable media attention for its work to analyze the impact of the new GED test on its adult student population. Discussions among the New York State Board of Regents in February 2012 focused on the possibility of developing a new standardized test of adult competencies that could serve as an alternative to the GED exam for New York adults. Some consideration appears to be given to developing this exam as part of a consortium of states, and potentially marketing this as an option for additional states in the future.

Wisconsin is generally regarded as having one of the most comprehensive and innovative approaches to adult secondary credentialing in the nation. The existing statutory scheme allows for seven different ways for an adult to secure a high school diploma or its equivalent, and includes testing (GED), post-secondary credit accumulation, and competency-based options. The discussion underway in Wisconsin is taking place within this broad array of alternatives, and focuses on making changes within the seven options that address concerns with the new GED as well as overall alignment with the state's Joyce Foundation *Shifting Gears* initiative, RISE (Regional Industry Skills Education).

Minnesota foundations. Minnesota has a rich tradition of local innovation in adult secondary credentialing to complement the traditional GED test option. Over the years many school districts have developed adult high school diploma programs that meet the needs of adult students. The state ABE office has promoted the development of strategies that prepare Minnesota adults for college and work readiness. Examples of recent innovations include

focused implementation of competency-based portfolio assessment strategies in Minneapolis and Mankato; stronger partnerships between school district ABE providers and post-secondary developmental education programs in Rochester; and expanded statewide implementation of pre-college bridge programs and integrated ABE and college-level instruction through the FastTRAC (Training, Resources and Credentials) initiative.¹⁰

Using these local and state innovations as the foundations for expanding adult secondary credential options offers the opportunity to develop approaches that are grounded in existing practices supported by evidence of success in addressing achievement and credential gaps. The use of competency-based assessments and contextualized instruction help adults demonstrate mastery of core academic competencies (in reading, writing, and mathematics) at the same time that they develop essential technical skills for specific jobs and careers. The competency-based methodology also allows for the demonstration and assessment of personal success skills, resulting in the award of an adult secondary credential that reflects achievement in core academic standard areas, technical skill mastery, and personal development essential for college and work readiness and success. This framework aligns with existing school district adult high school diploma programs as well as the FastTRAC initiative, and should serve as the conceptual parameters for a new student-centered and uniform approach to adult secondary credentialing across Minnesota.

¹⁰ For more information see <http://www.mnfasttrac.org>

Recommendations for the Adult Secondary Credential

After reviewing the various adult secondary credential models currently in use in Minnesota and other states, as well as the alternatives under consideration elsewhere, the Task Force offers the following recommendations for a new framework with multiple options for adults to secure a high school equivalency credential. This new framework preserves access to the GED but embraces a more comprehensive approach better aligned with adult learning context and needs, as well as broader competency assessment choices that address both achievement and career readiness gaps. Adults who choose the new competency-based option will have a more clearly defined opportunity to demonstrate evidence of academic, career and personal competencies needed for success in further education and training or employment.

In addition, for the first time Minnesota will have a statewide option for adult secondary credentialing that promotes consistent implementation, common outcomes and measurement, and alignment with individual and employer expectations. The Task Force anticipates that this work can largely be completed within existing resources, using reallocations and targeted investment to support development and sequential implementation of the new framework, once it is authorized by statute.

Statewide authorization, consistency and operational impact

Current law permits local school districts in Minnesota to offer an adult high school diploma at their option. Thus, there is no statewide alternative adult credentialing option, leading to uneven access across the state. Although there are districts that offer this option, the parameters and requirements for delivery and receipt are not consistent, making it difficult to

assess the impact and consequences of this alternative to the GED test. Given the relative mobility found within the Minnesota adult population, it makes sense to develop a set of alternatives (in addition to the existing adult diploma options) that are portable across the state. Moreover, uniformity and consistency in the requirements for and content of alternative credential programs builds credibility, allowing students, employers and post-secondary institutions to rely on the consistent rigor and process inherent in the model.

Securing the requisite consistency inherent in a statewide framework for adult secondary credentialing is possible only with a change to chapter 124D of Minnesota statutes. During the second phase of the Task Force work plan specific legislative proposals for amending current statutes will be developed, as well as an advocacy plan for securing these changes during the 2013 legislative session.

In addition, the operational impact of an additional credentialing option needs to be explicitly stated in order for policy-makers and district-level officials to make sensible choices about the timing

Given the relative mobility found within the Minnesota adult population, it makes sense to develop a set of alternatives that are portable across the state...Uniformity and consistency in the requirements for and content of alternative credential programs builds credibility, allowing students, employers and post-secondary institutions to rely on the consistent rigor and process inherent in the model.

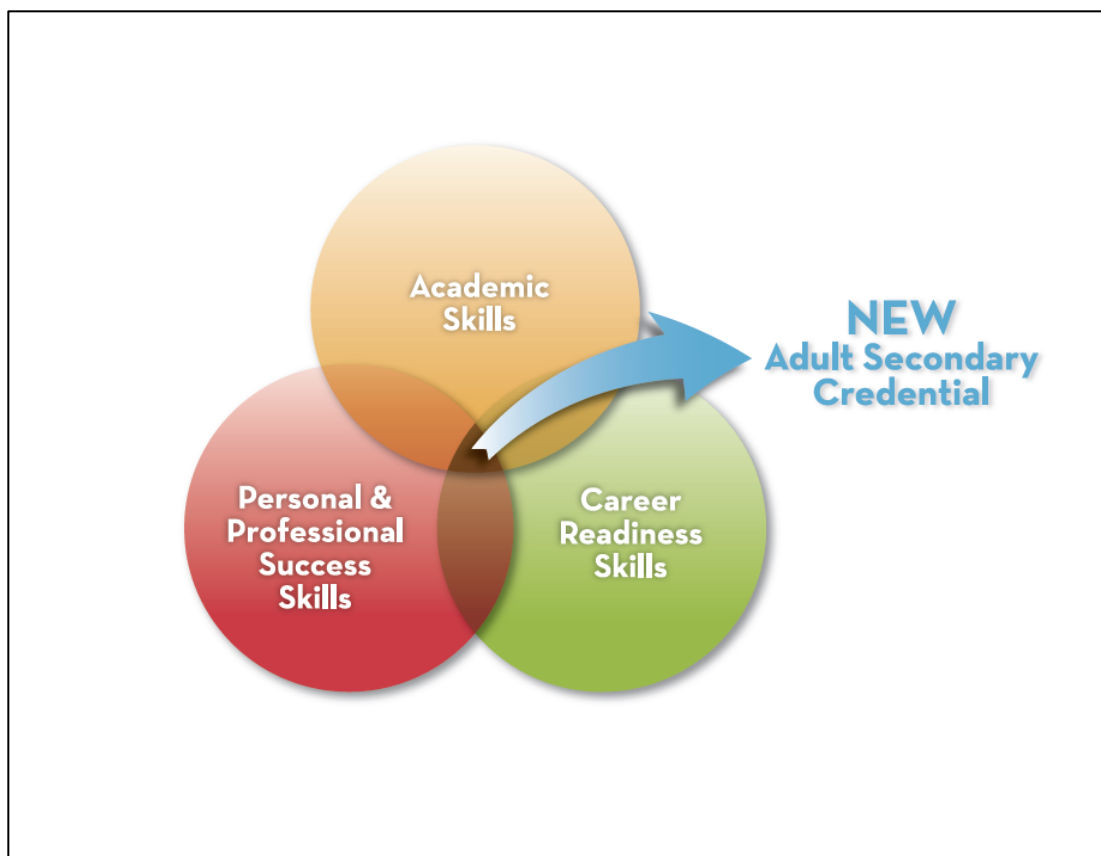
and scope of implementation. Consistent statewide implementation should result in economies of scale, obviating the need for divergent scale-up plans and repetitive use of state-level or consulting resources. For instance, a common implementation plan and schedule will permit local districts to use existing teaching staff (within ABE and classroom programs) to conduct the portfolio assessments for adult students, after completion of a state-sponsored training initiative. Developing implementation and training plans comprehensively can also promote resource sharing and flexible delivery approaches that are essential for effective implementation

throughout rural Minnesota. Perhaps most importantly, however, the expertise needed to launch and lead this initiative already exists within the MDE ABE office, allowing for budget-neutral implementation through redeployment of current state-level resources.

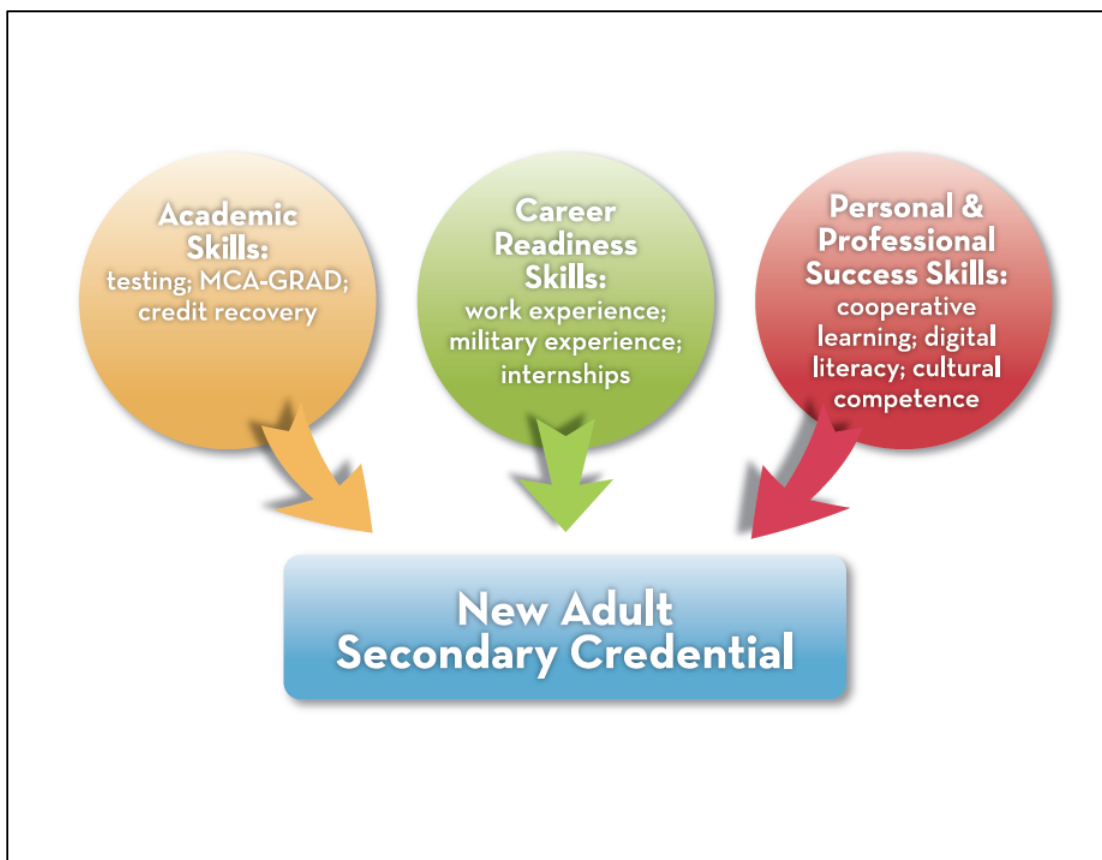
Academic, career, and personal/professional preparation

Both research and experience confirm the need for multiple approaches to assessment of adult learning competencies. Although standardized tests make sense for many adults and adequately address their academic and career goals and aspirations, it is not a solution for all learners. Given the diverse educational and occupational objectives, designing a new model that allows teachers to ask adults what their next step might be also supports a more customized approach that is uniquely tailored to each adult's educational, career, and life goals.

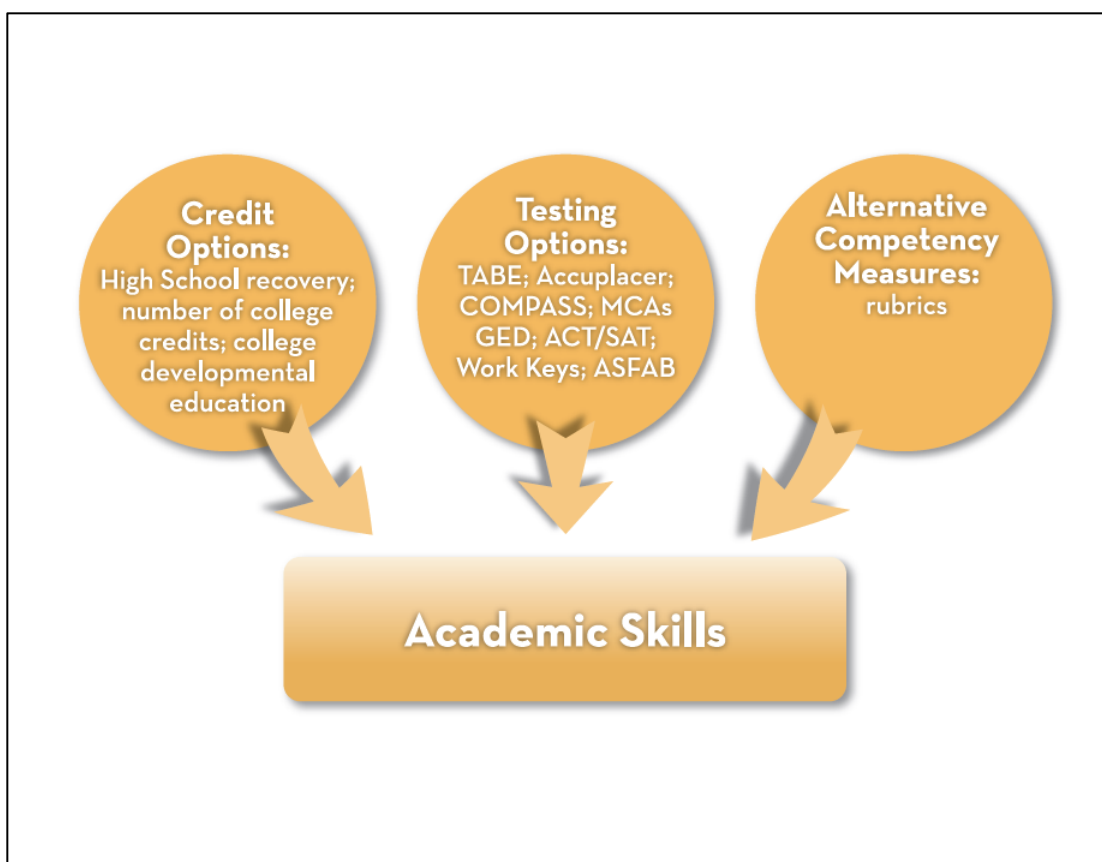
Leading workforce development strategies such as FastTRAC, Transitions and career pathways exemplify this new, learner-centric approach and provide an important context for designing a new adult secondary credential that shares similar design elements: an assessment-based, student-centered measurement of academic, vocational and personal competencies that aligns with workforce needs, civic engagement expectations, and community-focused efforts to eliminate economic-based opportunity and achievement gaps. By fully acknowledging this context, the new Minnesota adult secondary credential is intentionally designed to emerge from the intersection of assessment of multiple adult skill competencies. Combining a tri-partite approach to assessment of academic, career, and personal readiness for post-secondary education and work, the new model goes beyond the limitations of a single standardized test to measure the broadest possible array of skills and attributes necessary for education, work, and life success.



Awarding the new adult secondary credential results from application of a wide array of assessments and measurements currently used by local school districts, workforce centers, post-secondary institutions, and community-based organizations. Organizing these options into a coherent set of tools used to assess core adult skills and attributes in the three elemental areas (academic, career, and personal readiness) is the primary defining characteristic of the new adult credential option. All of the practices, assessment tools, and measurement methodologies described as part of this new framework are presently in use across Minnesota, and are supported by existing academic research, evidence-based results, and practical experience.



Academic skills and assessment tools. To receive a secondary credential equivalency, adults must demonstrate mastery of essential learning attributes. These essential attributes are traditionally understood to include reading, communication (oral and written), and mathematics (computation and analysis); in addition, adults must demonstrate fundamental comprehension and ability to utilize such concepts as critical thinking and analysis, synthesis and problem solving, digital literacy and competence. Although standardized tests measure these competencies, a test score alone does not reflect actual and potential intellectual growth and aptitude for further academic pursuit that are essential for success in college and in the workplace. Experience tells us that there are better ways to assess adults' skills and competencies.



Within the academic component of the new adult secondary credential, a variety of methods can be used to assess adults' mastery of core academic content. These options include evidence of accumulated credit for course content (either for recovered high school courses or college credit courses, including developmental education); achieving a required score on a standardized test of core academic content (such as the GED, TABE, Accuplacer or COMPASS, the ACT or SAT, Work Keys, or the ASFAB); or completion of an alternative assessment method such as a rubric¹¹ or common core competency portfolio. The MDE ABE office will research, analyze and approve a list of academic assessment options, accommodations and modifications to ensure appropriate levels of rigor and a fundamental consistency of approach

¹¹ 'Rubric' is commonly defined as the explicit set of criteria used for assessing a particular type of work or performance.

across Minnesota. ABE programs will select the appropriate methods for assessment from this approved list.

Career readiness skills and assessment tools. Adults who pursue a secondary credential frequently do so to secure evidence of skill mastery that is an essential prerequisite for entry-level employment in many jobs and career pathways. This process can be beneficial to adult students who often lack the knowledge, skills and perspective to plan for the future and envision a career pathway for themselves. Given the occupational motivation of these adults, it makes sense to offer assessment of work readiness skills that not only provides an official certification but tangible technical skills that credential holders can immediately put to use once they are hired. Again, most standardized tests used to measure adult skill attainment do not offer verification of technical skills that directly relate to the student's ability to perform a particular job or advance along a chosen career pathway. The new Minnesota adult secondary credential will offer both levels of verification, making it a useful and valuable measurement of work readiness for students and employers alike.



The technical skills needed for workplace success are as diverse and varied as the jobs and workers that exist across our state. Nevertheless, for workplace success in a chosen occupation several core attributes must generally be present: a clear sense of vocational choice and purpose, reflected in career planning and appropriate job acquisition skills; prior and pertinent occupational experience, either direct or related; and some evidence of prior skill development or training in a chosen occupation, either formal or informal. Career exploration and development skills can be developed and measured through ABE or workforce center programming, or through specialized offerings by community-based organizations. Prior and pertinent work experience can be both paid and unpaid, and may include internships, volunteer service, apprenticeships, or military service.

Documentation of these prior work experiences may take the form of on-the-job training programs; Work Keys assessments; or short-term or non-credit certifications from continuing education or customized training programs. Again, the MDE ABE office will research, analyze and approve a list of career/vocational assessment options, accommodations and modifications to ensure appropriate levels of rigor and a fundamental consistency of approach across Minnesota. ABE programs will select the appropriate methods for assessment from this approved list.

Personal readiness attributes and assessments. Finally, the most challenging and creative core component of the new adult secondary credential framework is the demonstrated mastery of core personal readiness attributes that prepare an adult for subsequent employment or continued education at the post-secondary level. In addition to demonstrated academic competence and career readiness, employers increasingly expect their applicants and employees to demonstrate aptitude for continued learning, effective performance of specific job tasks and duties, and personal ability to manage life and family issues in balance with job requirements and community engagement.



Adults can demonstrate their aptitude for continued training and development through effective performance of study skills and technology literacy. Aptitude for employment is reflected in portfolio content or other competency-based assessments that illustrate collaborative ability, cultural competence, socialization skills, situational judgment, conflict resolution, and communication ability. Finally, on a fundamental personal level, adults must be asked to demonstrate the ability to navigate community resources pertinent to individual and family sustainability; an awareness of health and wellness needs and the importance of sobriety, reliability and punctuality; and the capacity for basic research and synthesis needed for resolution of personal and professional issues as well as the ability to maintain balance and perspective.

Assessment of these personal and professional attributes is typically done through competence-based means that include portfolio development, capstone projects, project-based learning experiences, or reflection and presentation. The MDE ABE office will research, analyze and approve a list of personal readiness assessment options to ensure appropriate levels of rigor and a fundamental consistency of approach across Minnesota. ABE programs will select the appropriate methods for assessment from this approved list.

Strategies for Implementation

During the second phase of its work the Adult Secondary Credential Task Force will develop an action agenda to discuss the new alternative credential among key constituencies in advance of implementing an advocacy strategy to secure legislative action on the amendments to Ch. 124D needed to make this option available to local school districts. This work will take place during the late summer and fall of 2012 in advance of the 2013 legislative session and will engage a variety of stakeholders across the state in the development and execution of the action agenda.

Refining the proposed model. During the summer and early fall the Task Force and its consultants will continue to refine the proposed model, exploring practical details impacting advocacy and implementation efforts at both the state and local levels. Further research and analysis of the core credential components (academic, career, and personal readiness) will occur, as well as a closer examination of the various competency-based measurement techniques that might be used to demonstrate adult student mastery in these areas. Building a conceptual framework for implementation and delivery that explicitly aligns with existing research data and experiential outcomes is essential to begin demonstrating the overall effectiveness of the

alternative approach and to define key performance measurements for use at both the MDE and school district levels.

Defining the policy parameters and advocacy strategy. ABE leadership at the state and local levels has considerable experience and success in securing statutory changes that promote more effective educational programming for adult students across Minnesota. For example, the Literacy Action Network (LAN), the professional advocacy group for adult educators, has been actively involved in the process leading to the formulation of this task force, and is committed to moving the recommendations found in this report into the legislative process; LAN has a comprehensive, proven public policy program that draws together ABE professionals in consultation with professional public policy consultants to effect positive legislative and policy changes.

The Task Force will draw on this experience and expertise to develop strategies for securing the changes in statute, policy and practice needed to begin implementation of the new alternative adult secondary credential. This work will include drafting of specific legislative language and explanatory proposals.

Engaging key stakeholders. To develop an effective advocacy agenda, the Task Force will engage multiple stakeholders in its work. Focus groups—with ABE teachers, school district leadership and staff, employers, community leaders, post-secondary and workforce system partners, and community-based organizations—will take place in multiple locations across Minnesota in the early fall. These sessions will be a valuable opportunity for Task Force members and consultants to secure critical feedback about the proposed new model, as well as to build awareness and support for the timeliness and validity of this alternative approach to adult secondary credentialing.

In addition to the focus group outcomes, the Task Force is also considering adding representation from key allies and stakeholders to its ranks for the second phase of the project. An expanded leadership group will help ensure that all perspectives are considered during the development of the action agenda, and should strengthen the overall advocacy effort leading to the swift adoption of the statutory changes needed to make the new adult secondary credential an operational reality for school districts and adult students across Minnesota.

Conclusion: Potential Benefits of the New State Credentialing Approach

Assuming that the necessary statutory changes are made authorizing ABE programs to develop and deliver a new student-centered adult secondary credential in addition to existing standardized testing options, the Task Force offers the following list of potential benefits for students and their families, educational institutions, employers, and communities across Minnesota:

- Better preparation for jobs and career advancement opportunities.
- Increased individual and family stability.
- A clear pathway from poverty that aligns with educational and employment opportunity for underprepared adults.
- Better use of adults' resources by avoiding waste of time and increased debt.
- Reduction in time spent in college-level developmental education courses.
- A more appropriate option for building skill and competence for adult students who benefit from a contextualized, competency-based approach that intentionally aligns with employment preparation.
- Improved quality and efficiency in delivery of adult education programs and services at the state and local levels through an emphasis on budget-neutral implementation and maximization of faculty and staff capacity and expertise.
- Alignment with other innovative workforce development and education initiatives (e.g. FastTRAC) to create a comprehensive and integrated new delivery model.
- More adults with the self-confidence and skills necessary to secure employment, pursue higher education, and engage in the life of the community.

This list is not exhaustive, and will be augmented by the actual experience of adults who successfully obtain their secondary equivalency through the new assessment-based credential. For those adults over age 21 that are currently not being served by the K-12 system—or for whom standardized testing is not an effective option—the new adult secondary credential offers a meaningful and relevant alternative that promotes continued academic, work, and life success.

For more information, contact: Anne Weyandt, SheridanStowe LLC
e-mail: anneweyandt@sheridanstowe.com
Web: www.sheridanstowe.com

Appendix A References and Task Force Membership

Reference List

- Brookfield, S. M. (2005). *The Power of Critical Theory – Liberating Adult Learning and Teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Carnevale, A., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2010). *Help wanted: Projections of jobs and education requirements through 2018*. Washington, D.C.: Center on Education and the Workforce, Georgetown University.
- Delpit, Lisa (1995). *Other People's Children – Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. New York, NY: New Press.
- Dewey, J. (1925). *Democracy and Education – An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York, NY: The MacMillan Company.
- Garvey, J. & Grobe, T. (2011). *From GED to College Degree: Creating Pathways to Postsecondary Success for High School Dropouts*. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future.
- Governor's Workforce Development Council. (2012). *All hands on deck: Fifteen ideas for strengthening Minnesota's workforce*. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Governor's Workforce Development Council.
- Hart, L. A. (1983). *Human Brain and Human Learning*. White Plains, NY: Longman, Inc.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative Dimensions of Human Learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

- Minnesota Department of Education (2010). *Statewide ABE content standards explanation project: summary report and recommendations* (unpublished). St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Department of Education.
- Park, R., Ernst, S. & Kim, E. (2007). *Moving Beyond the GED: Low-Skilled Adult Transitions to Occupational Programs at Community Colleges Leading to Family-Supporting Careers* (Research Synthesis). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Research Center for Career and Technical Education (NRCCTE).
- Smith, Kevin G. (2012). *Alternative pathways to the high school equivalency diploma (internal memorandum)*. Albany, NY: State Education Department and the State University of New York.
- U.S. Department of Education (2012). *Investing in America's Future: A Blueprint for Transforming Career and Technical Education*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Adult & Vocational Education (OVAE). Downloaded from <http://www.ed.gov/ovae>
- U.S. Departments of Education, Health & Human Services, and Labor (2012). *Guiding principles for developing comprehensive career pathway systems*. Downloaded from <http://www.ed.gov/ovae>
- Zeus, L. (2005). *Critical Pedagogy and Race*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

2012 Minnesota Adult Secondary Credential Task Force Members

Kristine Halling, Program Supervisor, Ronald M. Hubbs Center for Lifelong Learning, St. Paul

Tim O'Brien, Program Manager, Roseville Adult Basic Education

Julie Nigon, Program Manager, Rochester Adult Basic Education

Beverlee Mountain, Program Coordinator, Mankato Area Adult Basic Education

Sarah Larson, Program Director, Cass Lake-Bena Adult Basic Education

Tom Cytron-Hysom, Facilitator, St. Paul Community Literacy Consortium

Marty Olsen, Adult Basic Education Instructor, State certified CASAS and TABE Trainer

Dr. Barry Shaffer, State Director and Adult Basic Education Supervisor

Brad Hasskamp, State ABE Policy & Operations Specialist

Jim Colwell, State High School Credential (GED and Adult Diploma) Specialist

**APPENDIX B:
LEARNER SEGMENTS, BARRIERS TO HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY,
ALTERNATIVES**

LEARNER SEGMENT	POTENTIAL BARRIERS	POTENTIAL ALTERNATIVES	TASK FORCE COMMENTS
Refugees & Immigrants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language proficiency • Cultural differences (norms & expectations) and perceptions • Literacy (primary language, English or both) • College readiness • Professional degree in another country but language issues • Work readiness • Cost of alternatives 	<p>Foreign Diploma Equivalence (translation of foreign diploma to Minnesota equivalency)</p> <p>Competency Based High School Equivalency Diploma/HSED (portfolio assessment to meet high school competencies)</p> <p>External Diploma Program (demonstration of skills and knowledge through life experiences)</p>	<p>Provides alternatives for individuals who are professionals, teens or over 25. Additional support provided for individuals with marginal language skills.</p>
Young adults 'left behind'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literacy • Cognitive approaches & issues • Self esteem & confidence • Substance abuse; delinquency; pregnancy; abuse or neglect • Purpose or motivation • Relevance • Work readiness • Cost of alternatives 	<p>HSED earned through additional courses at community/technical college</p> <p>(college courses complete gaps in HS requirements)</p> <p>Postsecondary Dual Credit Degree</p> <p>(completion of an established number of credits in areas not completed in high school)</p>	<p>Helps to address the K-12 to postsecondary disconnect that results in large numbers of HS grads requiring developmental education.</p>

		Competency Based High School Equivalency Diploma (portfolio assessment to meet high school competencies)	
People in poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost of alternatives • Literacy • Self esteem & confidence • Life essentials: food, housing, child care, transportation, medical care • Relevance • Work readiness 	<p>Postsecondary Dual Credit Degree</p> <p>(completion of an established number of credits in areas not completed in high school)</p> <p>External Diploma Program</p> <p>(demonstration of skills and knowledge through life experiences)</p>	<p>Dual Credit option would minimize the repeating of content and provide a streamlined way to acquire both a HS diploma and postsecondary training.</p> <p>Skills based option available through External Diploma option. Could provide an alternative with minimal seat time.</p>
Persons of color	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural differences (norms & expectations) and perceptions • Cost of alternatives • Relevance • Self esteem & confidence • Historic race-based gaps (access; achievement) 	<p>New GED requirements</p> <p>HSED earned through additional courses at community/technical college</p> <p>(college courses complete gaps in HS requirements)</p> <p>Competency Based High School Equivalency Diploma</p>	<p>Entire array of alternative options should be implemented to help address the historic and chronic achievement gap.</p>

		<p>(portfolio assessment to meet high school competencies)</p> <p>External Diploma Program</p> <p>(demonstration of skills and knowledge through life experiences)</p>	
First generation students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural differences (norms & expectations) and perceptions • Cost of alternatives • Inter-generational literacy issues • Health-related learning issues (e.g. fetal alcohol syndrome) • Relevance 	<p>Competency Based High School Equivalency Diploma</p> <p>(portfolio assessment to meet high school competencies)</p> <p>Postsecondary Dual Credit Degree</p> <p>(completion of an established number of credits in areas not completed in high school)</p> <p>External Diploma Program</p> <p>(demonstration of skills and knowledge through life experiences)</p>	Provide multiple options with an emphasis on competency based skill assessment and portfolio development.

Dislocated workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relevance • Work readiness • Self-esteem & confidence • Cost of alternatives • Life essentials: housing, food, medical care, child care, transportation 	<p>New GED requirements</p> <p>HSED earned through additional courses at community/technical college</p> <p>(college courses complete gaps in HS requirements)</p> <p>Postsecondary Dual Credit Degree</p> <p>(completion of an established number of credits in areas not completed in high school)</p> <p>External Diploma Program</p> <p>(demonstration of skills and knowledge through life experiences)</p> <p>Competency Based High School Equivalency Diploma</p> <p>(portfolio assessment to meet high school competencies)</p>	<p>Dislocated workers come with a wide discrepancy in academic preparation. Multiple options must be available for rapid acquisition of the High School Diploma or equivalent to facilitate readmission into the workforce.</p>

Persons with disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognitive approaches & issues • Relevance • Ability level • Nature of disability • Self esteem & confidence 	<p>HSED earned through additional courses at community/technical college</p> <p>(college courses complete gaps in HS requirements)</p> <p>External Diploma Program</p> <p>(demonstration of skills and knowledge through life experiences)</p> <p>Competency Based High School Equivalency Diploma</p> <p>(portfolio assessment to meet high school competencies)</p>	<p>Alternatives must be backed-up with additional services providing the necessary support for improved student success. Any increase in the number of alternatives will have a significant impact on this learner segment.</p>

