

NCSALL Seminar Guide:

*Using Beyond the  
GED: Making  
Conscious Choices  
About the GED and  
Your Future*

November 2006



National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy

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# Beyond the GED

This seminar guide was created by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) to introduce adult education practitioners to *Beyond the GED: Making Conscious Choices About the GED and Your Future*, lesson plans that gives adult learners an opportunity to practice writing, use graphs, read charts, and analyze research findings on the economic impact of the GED. Programs or professional developers may want to use this seminar in place of a regularly scheduled meeting, such as a statewide training or a local program staff meeting.

## Objectives:

By the end of the seminar, participants will be able to:

- Explain why it is important for adult learners to understand the economic impact of the GED
- Utilize with learners the lessons in *Beyond the GED*
- Summarize the key points from lessons in *Beyond the GED*

**Participants:** 8 to 12 practitioners who work in adult education—teachers and tutors

**Time:** 3 hours


## Agenda:

- 10 minutes 1. Welcome and Introductions
- 5 minutes 2. Objectives and Agenda
- 10 minutes 3. Overview of *Beyond the GED*
- 55 minutes 4. The Research
- 15 minutes **Break**
- 55 minutes 5. Analyzing Lessons from *Beyond the GED*
- 20 minutes 6. Planning Next Steps
- 10 minutes 7. Evaluation of the Seminar




## Session Preparation:

This guide includes the information and materials needed to conduct the seminar—step-by-step instructions for the activities, approximate time for each activity, and notes and other ideas for conducting the activities. The handouts, ready for photocopying, are at the end of the guide.

**Participants will need the following guide at the seminar.** The guide can be downloaded from the NCSALL Web site at [www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/beyond\\_ged\\_revised.pdf](http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/beyond_ged_revised.pdf)

-  *Beyond the GED: Making Conscious Choices About the GED and Your Future*. April 2000, Updated 2006.

The facilitator should review the guide, in addition to studying the seminar steps and preparing the materials on the following list.

	<b>Newsprints</b> (Prepare ahead of time.)
___	<u>Objectives and Agenda</u> (p. 5)
___	<u>Beyond the GED Lesson</u> (p. 8)
___	<u>Next Steps</u> (p. 8)
___	<u>Useful/How to Improve</u> (p. 9)
	<b>Handouts</b> (Make copies for each participant.)
___	<i>A Research Vocabulary</i>
___	<i>What the Research Says</i>
	<b>Reading</b> (Make copies for each participant.)
___	<b><i>Beyond the GED: Making Conscious Decisions About the GED and Your Future</i></b>
	<b>Materials</b>
___	Newsprint easel and blank sheets of newsprint
___	Markers, pens, tape
___	Sticky dots

**Steps:****1. Welcome and Introductions**

(10 minutes)


**Note to Facilitator**

Since time is very tight, it's important to move participants along gently but firmly if they are exceeding their time limit for introductions.

- **Welcome participants** to the seminar. **Introduce yourself** and state your role as facilitator. Explain how you came to facilitate this seminar and who is sponsoring it.
- **Ask participants to introduce themselves** (name, program, and role).
- **Make sure that participants know** where bathrooms are located, when the session will end, when the break will be, and any other housekeeping information.

**2. Objectives and Agenda**

(5 minutes)

-  **Post the newspaper Objectives and Agenda** and review the objectives and steps with the participants.

**Objectives**

By the end of the seminar, you will be able to:

- Explain why it is important for adult learners to understand the economic impact of the GED
- Utilize with learners the lessons in *Beyond the GED*
- Summarize the key points from lessons in *Beyond the GED*


**Agenda**

1. Welcome and Introductions (Done!)
2. Objectives and Agenda (Doing)
3. Overview of *Beyond the GED*
4. The Research
5. Analyzing Lessons from *Beyond the GED*
6. Planning Next Steps
7. Evaluation of the Seminar

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### 3. Overview of *Beyond the GED*



(10 minutes)

-  **Explain that in this next activity participants will review the contents of *Beyond the GED*.** Revised in 2006 to include new data and information on the Internet, this guide for GED instructors offers lesson plans and helps teachers develop as professionals. It also gives adult learners an opportunity to practice writing, use graphs, read charts, and analyze research findings on the economic impact of the GED. The guide is organized into three units—The Labor Market, Pursuing Higher Education, and What the Research Tells Us.
- Make sure that each participant has a copy of *Beyond the GED*. **Ask the participants to take about 10 minutes to read** the Introduction, pp. 1–2, and briefly preview the rest of the guide. Invite the participants to ask questions about the way the guide is organized.


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### 4. The Research

(55 minutes)


-  **Explain that in this next activity participants** will participate in Lesson 2 from Unit 3 of the guide. The goals/objectives of the lesson are to gain practice understanding research findings and examine the connection between the GED and earning power.
- **Ask participants what they think** of when they hear the word *research*. Who conducts research? About what kind of issues? What are the purposes of research? Explain that a lot of research has been done in recent years to better understand the relationship between the GED and earnings. How do participants think this kind of research is conducted (interviews, surveys, quantitative, qualitative)?
-  **Review the following vocabulary** used in research with the group: Constant, Correlation, Empirical, Qualitative, Quantitative, Sample; Simple Random Sampling, and Variable. See Handout A *Research Vocabulary*.
- **Explain that the participants are going to be reading an article** that highlights the results of a number of studies on the economic impact of the GED. How could the GED have a positive effect on earnings? What do the participants think the results of the studies they will be reading about might be, and why? Do they think that the findings will

be the same for men as for women? Why or why not? Do they think that the findings will be the same for those from different ethnic or racial groups? Why or why not? What are some other characteristics that might lead to different outcomes in the labor market?

-  **Distribute the Handout *What the Research Says*.** Have the participants read it, and work in small groups to answer the questions at the end of each section.
- **As a large group, discuss the key findings.** Were they surprising? If yes, why? If no, why not? Does it make them think differently about preparing for the GED?
- **Have the participants think about the printed materials** (brochures, fliers) that advertise their GED program. What messages do they convey about the GED? Does this research support the messages?

Break (15 minutes)

## 5. Analyzing Lessons from *Beyond the GED* (55 minutes)

- **Explain to participants that in this activity they will be taking a closer look at the lessons in *Beyond the GED* and thinking about how they might use the lessons with their learners.**
- **Ask the participants to form small groups and assign one of the following lessons to each group:**
  - Unit 1: Lesson 1: What Kinds of Jobs Are Out There
  - Unit 1: Lesson 2: What's Happening to the Jobs That Do Exist?
  - Unit 1: Lesson 3: Wages
  - Unit 2: Lesson 1: Education and Earnings
  - Unit 2: Lesson 2: Going to College
  - Unit 3: Lesson 1: Policy and the GED
  - Unit 3: Lesson 2: Other Factors Affecting Wages
-  **Post the newspaper Beyond the GED Lesson.** Ask the groups to read through the assigned lesson and discuss the key points and how they think they can use or adapt this lesson for their learners. Pass out blank sheets of newsprint, and tell groups to record their ideas on them. Ask them to include on their newsprints the title of the lesson,


the key message to learners, and what the benefits for learners might be in working on the lesson. Give them 20 minutes to do this.

<b>Beyond the GED Lesson</b>
Title of Lesson:
Key Message(s) to Learners:
Benefits for Learners:
Lesson Uses/Adaptations:

- **Ask groups to briefly summarize and explain the key points** from their lessons, highlighting the notes recorded on the posted newsprints.

## 6. Planning Next Steps for the Group

(20 minutes)

- **Ask participants to take five minutes to reflect on how they might use *Beyond the GED: Making Conscious Choices About the GED and Your Future* in their instruction and/or programs.**
-  **Post the newsprint Next Steps.** Explain that now that the individual participants have ideas for using the lessons in their instruction and/or programs, the group should make a plan about its next steps.

<b>Next Steps</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How might participants share with each other how the lessons worked, or how might they ask each other questions?</li> </ul>


- **Write up potential next steps** on the newsprint as the participants mention them. After five minutes of brainstorming, ask participants to silently look at the options and individually select two ways for the group to continue the discussions.



- **Hand out two sticky dots to each participant** and ask the group to put their dots next to the idea that they would most like the group to do. If they don't want to do any of the activities, they should not put their dots on the newsprint.
- **Lead the group in organizing its choice. For example:**
  - If they choose to schedule a follow-up meeting, set the date, time, and place for the meeting, and brainstorm an agenda for the meeting. Determine who will definitely be coming, and who will take the responsibility to cancel the meeting in case of bad weather.
  - If they choose to organize an e-mail list, pass around a sheet for everyone to write their e-mail addresses. Decide who is going to start the first posting, and discuss what types of discussion or postings people would like to see (e.g., questions about how to try out something in their classroom, descriptions of what happened after they tried it, sharing of other resources, etc.).

## 7. Evaluation of the Seminar

(10 minutes)

- **Explain to participants that, in the time left, you would like to get feedback from them about this seminar.** You will use this feedback in shaping future seminars.
-  **Post the newsprint Useful/How to Improve.**

Useful	How to Improve

Ask participants first to tell you what was useful or helpful to them about the design and content of this seminar. Write their comments, without response from you, on the newsprint under “Useful.”

- **Then ask participants for suggestions on how to improve this design and content.** Write their comments, without response from you, on the newsprint under “How to Improve.” If anyone makes a

negative comment that's not in the form of a suggestion, ask the person to rephrase it as a suggestion for improvement, and then write the suggestion on the newsprint.

- **Do not make any response to participants' comments during this evaluation.** It is very important for you not to defend or justify anything you have done in the seminar or anything about the design or content, as this will discourage further suggestions. If anyone makes a suggestion you don't agree with, just nod your head. If you feel some response is needed, rephrase their concern: "So you feel that what we should do instead of the small group discussion is . . . ? Is that right?"
- **Refer participants to the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy's Web site ([www.ncsall.net](http://www.ncsall.net)) for further information.** Point out that most NSCALL publications may be downloaded for free from the Web site. Print versions can be ordered by contacting NSCALL at World Education: [ncsall@worlded.org](mailto:ncsall@worlded.org).
- **Thank everyone** for coming and participating in the seminar.

## A Research Vocabulary

Sample	Any subset of a population
Simple random sampling	A sampling procedure in which every member of the population has equal and independent chance of being chosen to be in the sample
Variable	Any characteristic on which the elements of a sample or population differ from each other
Correlation	The extent to which two or more things are related
Qualitative research	Research that looks at distinguishing characteristics, but does not quantify those characteristics
Quantitative research	Research that is handled numerically
Constant	Any identical characteristic of all members of a sample or population
Empirical	Something that is derived from actual observation or experiment, as compared to theoretical



## What the Research Says

Over the past few years, a team of educational researchers based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Brown University has been studying the economic impact of the General Educational Development (GED) credential. They have been trying to understand whether young people who gain GEDs after dropping out of the formal school system earn more, on average, than their peers who dropped out and did not get GEDs.

Economists have found that, for the general population, average earnings vary by race, gender, and skill level. So the research team has also examined whether the earnings of GED holders vary by race, by gender, or by their scores on GED tests. They have tried to differentiate between the impact of the GED credential and other, harder-to-observe factors such as personal motivation. In other words, if two people dropped out of high school and one earned a GED while the other did not, and they were relatively equal on all other characteristics, what happens to earning power? Does the person with the GED earn more?

The answer to this question may seem obvious. Most people would say, of course the person with the GED earns more. But researchers have tried to show that empirically. They have also tried to learn why. Is it because of the GED itself, or because of personal characteristics such as motivation or work ethic?

The researchers have also tried to understand whether dropouts with the GED engaged in more training, postsecondary education, and military service than dropouts without the credential. The hypothesis is that GED holders do enroll in more higher education programs and military service than dropouts without the GED, because a high school diploma or GED is often needed for entry.

This article will examine the results of four research studies.

### **Access to Postsecondary, Training, Military Service**

The first study, by Richard J. Murnane, John B. Willett, and Kathryn Parker Boudett, used empirical data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. This is an annual survey which asks detailed personal, educational, and labor market questions of a random sample of more than 12,000 men and women who were age 14-21 in 1979. The authors studied a subset of these respondents—those who dropped out before finishing high school. Because they used a fairly sizable random sample drawn from the population, they can generalize from the study to the whole population of dropouts.

The Murnane, Willett, and Boudett study examined how the acquisition of the GED affected the likelihood that high school dropouts would obtain training, postsecondary education, or enter military service. The researchers also tried to understand whether the differences in use of postsecondary education, training, and military service between permanent dropouts and those with GEDs resulted from differences inherent in the dropouts (those intangibles), or were attributable to the GED credential. For example, perhaps the people who got GEDs had more motivation overall than those who did not, and the motivation, rather than the GED, was what resulted in the differences.

The researchers found that the probability that a dropout participated in postsecondary education or training (not on-the-job training) increased after the dropout received a GED, and was not related to other observable characteristics in the dropouts. This held true for both men and women. However, fewer than 50% of the GED recipients in the study had entered postsecondary education or training by the age of 26, and only 20% of GED recipients completed one year of college by age 26.

On the other hand, the probability that a dropout, with or without GED, would enroll in military service was dependent upon characteristics held by the dropout upon the time of leaving school, like a family history of military service, and not upon whether the person had a GED. The authors of this study point out that their findings do not indicate that the GED, military service, and training systems are well designed policy responses to the problems of dropouts, or are effective institutions. Their findings show only that the GED is a route into these existing institutions for high school dropouts.

- What are this research study's main findings?
- Do they surprise you?
- Why do you think so few GED recipients attend college?
- What are the comparable statistics for high school graduates?
- Why do you think there is such a big difference?
- What might be done to increase the number of GED recipients who attend college?

### **Effect of the GED on Male Earnings Over Time**

Another study by the same team, also using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, examined whether male high school dropouts' wages, annual number of hours worked, and annual earnings are affected by the acquisition of the GED. The researchers examined how, over time, the GED alters wages and hours in the labor market. They looked at how this differed by race and

ethnicity. In other words, do GED holders work more hours over the course of a year than their peers without GEDs? Do they earn more per hour? Do they earn more over the course of a year? And does this vary by race? (They were only looking at young males.)

They found that the GED has a positive effect upon the rate of wage growth for young males, regardless of race. GED holders earned more than their peers without GEDs. Sometimes the higher earnings were due to higher hourly wages, sometimes the GED holders worked more hours per year (that is, non-GED holders experienced greater unemployment or greater *underemployment* than GED holders). However, acquisition of the GED did not bring people out of poverty. In this study, they found that the earnings gain of GED holders, as compared to dropouts without GEDs, was modest.

- What are this research study's main findings?
- The 1995 poverty level figures for the 48 contiguous states and Washington, DC, are displayed in the chart below. Acquisition of the GED does not, in general, bring young males out of poverty. Having read this article, what are your plans for ensuring your ability to achieve financial security?

Size of Family Unit	1	2	3	4	5
Amount	\$7,470	\$10,030	\$12,590	\$15,150	\$17,710

(Source: *Federal Register*, Vol. 60, No. 27, February 9, 1995, pp. 7772-7774)

### The Relationship Between GED Score and Earnings

The research team of John Tyler, Richard Murnane, and John Willett examined the labor market benefits (or *returns*) to cognitive skills as measured by GED test scores, and whether the returns vary by gender and race. The premise of the study is that, while the average cognitive skill level of school dropouts is low, there is still considerable variation in the cognitive skills of dropouts. They ask: Do higher cognitive skills, as indicated by higher GED scores, translate into higher earnings?

They found that the average annual earnings of young dropouts are quite low: from a low of \$9,394 for males in New York in 1995 to a high of \$10,869 in Florida in 1995. Young female dropouts earned even less: \$6,886 in New York in 1995 to \$7,955 in Florida in 1994. These average earnings include those people who earned \$0. This acts to bring the average down. It is

important to include those who earn nothing because they represent people who aren't employed. The reason they aren't employed may be because they have low cognitive skills.

In their study, they found that skills do seem to matter, regardless of race or gender. Those dropouts with higher cognitive skills, as measured by higher GED scores, earned more on average than their peers with lower scores, after five years in the labor market. This varied from group to group: females saw a higher return to cognitive skills than did males. Nonwhites saw a higher return to cognitive skills than did whites.

Since, as the previous study showed, the GED does result in some benefit in the labor market, the researchers then tried to eliminate the effect of the GED. They found that, among those dropouts who scored below the passing level for the GED, those with higher scores (but not enough to get the GED) earned on average about \$1,000 (or 10%) more than non-passers with lower test scores. This was true for all groups except white females.

The research team also looked at GED recipients and found similar patterns. Those GED holders with higher GED scores earned, on average, \$900 to \$1,400 more per year, again a 10% gain over those with lower (but passing) GED scores. Only white males did not experience this gain.

So, in most cases, cognitive skills do result in a return in the labor market. But the authors of this study caution that the earnings, on average, are still pretty low.

- What are this research study's main findings?
- Would this tend to encourage high school students to drop out, or to stay in high school? Why or why not?
- Would it encourage young people studying for their GEDs to work harder? Why or why not?

### **The Signaling Effect of the GED**

The previous studies discussed here, as well as other studies, have shown that the GED provides at least a modest economic return. Researchers were not able to ascertain, however, whether the economic return was realized because of the GED, or because of other, less tangible factors such as motivation, that the GED holders may have. The research group of Tyler, Murnane, and Willett used the fact that some states required higher scores to pass than others did to examine the impact of the GED credential rather than other human factors on income.



A simple way to think about the research is to consider two states with comparable economies and different score requirements for passing the GED (one state has higher requirements). The researchers looked at earnings of GED test takers who had the same scores in the two states. In the state with the lower passing standard, the test takers received the GED. In the other state, they did not. Keep in mind that both groups, therefore, were only *on the margin* of passing. In other words, they were low scoring passers, or high scoring non-passers, presumably with the same motivation to pass the GED. If they had changed places in terms of the states they lived in, the passers would be non-passers, and the non-passers would be passers!

The annual earnings of the white GED passers, five years after receiving the GED, were 10 percent to 20 percent more than the annual earnings of the whites who had similar cognitive skills as measured by scores on the GED and yet did not hold the GED credential.

To understand what this finding may mean, it's useful to think about the possible mechanisms that may cause the GED to affect earnings. Let's assume that preparing for the GED tests increases dropouts' cognitive skills. Economists, including those mentioned here, have shown that increased cognitive skills lead to increased earnings. That's one mechanism, usually known as human capital development.

Another mechanism is access. Many postsecondary education programs require applicants to have either a high school diploma or a GED. If postsecondary education leads to increased earnings, and it has been shown to do so, then the entry that a GED gives to postsecondary education could result in higher earnings. Whether the same is true for training is less clear.

The third mechanism, and the one that is relevant to this research, is the *signaling effect* of the GED. Employers may use the GED as a signal that tells them that GED holders will be, in the long run, more productive employees, and reward them with higher earnings. For young whites, at least, this seems to be the case.

The researchers were able to replicate this finding with similar data sets.

- What were the findings of this research?
- What does it tell us about the value of the GED as a signal to employers?
- Besides signaling, what are some other ways in which the GED can lead to increased earnings?

### **So What Do We Know?**

It's important to keep in mind, when reviewing research, that the findings hold true only for the population group specified in the study.

We do know that the GED boosts the earnings of a number of groups in comparison to high school dropouts without the GED. We also know that, despite this earnings boost, it does not provide the holder with earnings similar to that of high school diploma holders. Nor does it assure what has come to be called a *living wage*.

We know that the GED boosts earnings in a number of ways. If, in studying for the GED, someone's cognitive skills are increased, that is rewarded in the labor market. And, the GED can provide access to postsecondary education, a valuable commodity in the labor market. Thirdly, the GED can provide employers with a signal that the holder is a worthwhile candidate for employment. We don't know if this mechanism holds true across races and cognitive ability.

### **What Does that Mean for Educational Policy, Program Design, and Instruction?**

The research we have examined here should suggest to policymakers that, while the GED does help those who have dropped out, every effort should be made to prevent adolescents from leaving high school. The *alternative credential* of the GED is a useful, but not equal, credential to a traditional diploma. (Those with strong cognitive skills in high school should especially pay heed to this information, because the GED does not differentiate them from dropouts with strong cognitive skills who don't get a GED.) Policymakers should consider whether the availability of the GED at the age of 18 seems like an easy alternative to high school and is, in effect, drawing students out of school.

Program designers and curriculum developers should keep in mind that, despite the earning power that the GED offers to many groups, GED holders, on average, do not earn enough to move themselves out of poverty. Postsecondary education is necessary for that. This means that GED learners interested in better jobs should understand from the point of entry that the GED is a means of entry into further education, not an end in itself. Courses should be designed to prepare learners academically and socially for the transition into higher education.

## References

All information for this article was drawn from the following research reports and journal articles:

Murnane, R., Willett, J., & Tyler, J. (2000). Who Benefits from Obtaining a GED? Evidence from High School and Beyond. *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 82(1), 23-37.

Murnane, R., Willett, J., & Boudett, K.P. (1997). Does a GED Lead to More Training, Postsecondary Education and Military Service for School Dropouts? *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 51(1).

Murnane, R., Willett, J., & Boudett, K.P. (1995). Do High School Dropouts Benefit from Obtaining a GED? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 17 (2), 133-147.

Tyler, J., Murnane, R., & Willett, J. (1999). Estimating the Labor Market Signaling Value of the GED. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 115(2), 431-468.

Tyler, J., Murnane, R., & Willett, J. (1999) *Cognitive Skills Matter in the Labor Market, Even for School Dropouts* (NCSALL Report #15). Cambridge, MA: National Center for Study of Adult Learning and Literacy.



# Information About NCSALL

## **NCSALL's Mission**

NCSALL's purpose is to improve practice in educational programs that serve adults with limited literacy and English language skills, and those without a high school diploma. NCSALL is meeting this purpose through basic and applied research, dissemination of research findings, and leadership within the field of adult learning and literacy.

NCSALL is a collaborative effort among the Harvard Graduate School of Education, World Education, The Center for Literacy Studies at The University of Tennessee, Rutgers University, and Portland State University. NCSALL is funded by the U.S. Department of Education through its Institute of Education Sciences (formerly Office of Educational Research and Improvement).

## **NCSALL's Research Projects**

The goal of NCSALL's research is to provide information that is used to improve practice in programs that offer adult basic education (ABE), English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and adult secondary education services. In pursuit of this goal, NCSALL has undertaken research projects in four areas: (1) student motivation, (2) instructional practice and the teaching/learning interaction, (3) staff development, and (4) assessment.

## **Dissemination Initiative**

NCSALL's dissemination initiative focuses on ensuring that practitioners, administrators, policymakers, and scholars of adult education can access, understand, judge, and use research findings. NCSALL publishes *Focus on Basics*, a quarterly magazine for practitioners; *Focus on Policy*, a twice-yearly magazine for policymakers; *Review of Adult Learning and Literacy*, an annual scholarly review of major issues, current research, and best practices; and *NCSALL Reports* and *Occasional Papers*, periodic publications of research reports and articles. In addition, NCSALL sponsors the Connecting Practice, Policy, and Research Initiative, designed to help practitioners and policymakers apply findings from research in their instructional settings and programs.

For more information about NCSALL, to download free copies of our publications, or to purchase bound copies, please visit our Web site at:

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