

# Expanding and Improving Distance Learning Options for GED® Students In Rural Pennsylvania

»Esther Prins, Ph.D.<sup>1</sup> »Cathy Kassab, Ph.D.<sup>2</sup> »Brendaly Drayton<sup>1</sup> »Ramazan Gungor<sup>1</sup>

A high school education is a prerequisite for pursuing postsecondary education and for securing stable, higher-wage employment. Many rural Pennsylvanians lack a high school or GED (General Educational Development) diploma, yet have limited access to adult education courses. Distance learning (DL) is a promising way to enable rural youth and adults to obtain a GED credential. In this study, the following GED distance learning providers were identified: Pennsylvania Department of Education -- Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education (ABLE), national online companies, some community colleges, a public broadcasting station, and community-based organizations.

## What is the need for GED instruction in PA?

- Approximately 1.2 million Pennsylvania adults have trouble performing the complex literacy activities that many well-paid jobs require.<sup>3</sup>
- In 2000, 19% of rural Pennsylvanians aged 25 or older had less than a high school education.<sup>4</sup>
- In 2008, only 1.5% (23,645) of the 1.6 million Pennsylvanians without a high school education took the GED Tests.<sup>5</sup>

## What are the benefits of a GED credential?

- GED recipients earn \$115 more per week and \$3,500 more in annual personal income than adults without a high school education.<sup>6</sup>
- Adults who obtain the GED *at or before age 20* earn, on average, \$77 more per week than those who postpone high school completion.<sup>6</sup>
- Adults with a GED credential are more likely to vote and volunteer than those who have not completed high school.<sup>6</sup>

## What is distance learning?

- Students complete all or part of an educational program in a geographical location apart from the institution hosting the program.
- Uses print-based materials, television, video, radio, the Internet, and/or other technologies.

## Why use distance learning?

- Reaches learners who would otherwise be unable to enroll in a GED program due to barriers such as transportation, child care, work, disabilities, scheduling conflicts, or privacy concerns.
- Rural PA distance learners in ABLE programs are as likely to make educational gains and to pass the GED Tests as face-to-face learners.
- Can be as effective and cost-efficient as traditional education for adult basic education students.<sup>7</sup>

## Who is currently participating in DL programs?

From 2004 to 2008, 4% (975) of all rural GED students in ABLE-funded programs participated in DL. These learners:

- Are young, with a median age of 22
- Are more likely to be female (65%) and low-income (60%) than face-to-face learners
- Tend to have goals of entering or retaining employment
- Typically have a 10<sup>th</sup> grade education—higher than rural face-to-face learners

## Recommendations:

Based upon the findings, the following recommendations are made to expand and improve distance learning opportunities for rural Pennsylvanians studying for their GED Tests.

### Increase:

- awareness about the GED credential and distance learning through a campaign in English and Spanish
- availability of high-speed Internet and access to computer software and hardware
- funding for GED instruction via distance learning
- access to the Official GED Practice Test® and GED Test Centers in rural areas
- DL students' opportunities to transition to college
- types of sites where adults can enroll in DL
- range and types of materials that can be used by DL students

### Ensure:

- data reporting systems that accurately reflect the number of DL students passing the GED Tests
- ongoing professional development and support of research on best practices in DL
- social, academic, and financial support for rural DL students

### Create:

- an accelerated DL GED course for academically qualified candidates

### Protect:

- rural residents from unauthorized online GED credential programs

Having my GED has improved my self-esteem. There is hope. There is nothing stopping me. I know that anything is possible.  
~ Linda W., GED Distance Learning Student



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<sup>1</sup> Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

<sup>2</sup> By the Numbers Data Analysis and Statistical Solutions, West Decatur, PA

<sup>3</sup> National Center for Educational Statistics (n.d.). National Assessment of Adult Literacy state and county estimates of low literacy. <http://nces.ed.gov/naal/estimates/StateEstimates.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> Center for Rural Pennsylvania (2003, July/August). Newsletter. <http://www.ruralpa.org/news0703.html>

<sup>5</sup> GED Testing Service (2009). 2008 GED testing program statistical report. Washington, DC: Author.

<sup>6</sup> Song, W., & Hsu, Y. (2008). *Economic and noneconomic outcomes for GED credential recipients* (GED Testing Service Research Studies, 2008-2). Washington, DC: GED Testing Service.

<sup>7</sup> Drummond, L. (1993). *Flexible delivery of adult literacy and basic education programs*. Bendigo, Australia: Loddon Campaspe TAFE College.