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Issue: GED preparation and testing procedures in New York City

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. The Community Service Society strongly believes in the importance of the GED for New York City's workforce and economic development. We are currently working on a report about the New York City GED system, which we plan to release this Spring. We look forward to discussing the report with all of you upon its release.

My comments today will focus on three points:

1. The value of the GED as a workforce and economic tool;
2. Challenges and opportunities within our current GED system; and
3. Recommendations for how we can improve our use of the GED in making our workforce more competitive and our economy stronger.

1. The Value of the GED

There are over 1.5 million individuals in New York City ages 18 to 64, who are out of school and without a high school diploma; this represents nearly a third of our working age population. As such, the GED has an important role to play, especially as changes in our economy require a workforce with higher skill levels. Professions for workers with low skills continue to disappear—the GED, and the level of basic skills that it represents, is a requirement for most jobs and a prerequisite to entering apprenticeship or vocational training programs.

- *Despite perceptions to the contrary, GED attainment provides tangible economic benefits.* Recent research shows that individuals who leave high school with weak cognitive skills (two years below their grade upon dropping out) benefit from GED attainment.¹ Statistics for New York City from various sources show that the vast majority of local dropouts are at least two years behind in their skill levels.² Labor market data from recent years in New York also shows individuals with a high school diploma or GED (but without college degrees) earned up to 35 percent more than those without

¹ Mohn, T. "In These Classrooms, the GED is Only a Start". *The New York Times*, December 14, 2008.
Murnane, R. J., Willett, J. B., & Boudett, K. P. (1999). Do Male Dropouts Benefit From Obtaining a GED?, *Postsecondary Education, and Training, Evaluation Review*, 23(5). Boudett, K. P., Murnane, R. J., & Willett, J. B. (2000). "Second-Chance" Strategies for Women Who Drop Out of School. *Monthly Labor Review*, 123(12).

² Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation, New York City Department of Education, "Summary Findings of Research and Development Work on Over-age Under-Credited Youth in New York City," October 25, 2006. New York City Mayor's Office of Adult Education, "It Starts With a Goal: The Transformative Power of Adult Education." Briefing Paper for the Adult Education Visioning Retreat, September 2007.

secondary level certification.³ That means more dollars into working class families and communities, more economic activity, and increased tax revenue. Furthermore, individuals without a diploma or GED are cut off from making the next step to college and many vocational training programs, which can provide even greater economic benefits.

- *GED attainment does NOT represent a lowering of expectations for individuals who should receive a high school diploma.* We believe that everyone who can achieve a high school diploma should do so – however, the vast majority of GED-eligible individuals have “aged out” of their eligibility to receive a high school diploma in New York. If they are to succeed in the workplace, they will need a GED at the least—without this credential they will be shut out of most good jobs and any opportunities at further training or college. The GED is a necessary first step for them on the path to sustainable, family-supporting careers.

2. Challenges and opportunities within our current GED system

Some basic statistics tell us a lot about the GED system in New York City:

- *We are not getting eligible individuals into GED programs* -- despite the 1.6 million eligible individuals, only 26,000 New Yorkers took a GED test in 2006. This represents only 1.6 percent of the eligible population.
- *We are not adequately preparing those who do take the test* -- of those that did take the exam in 2006, only 43 percent passed in New York City. This is an abysmal figure, compared to the national pass rate of 69 percent.⁴
- *Our current GED system is not sufficiently connected to our workforce development investments* – New York City’s GED preparation programs, with some notable exceptions, are not formally connected to career preparation. Other states, such as Washington, have mandated that GED must integrate either job training for specific industries or college transition. Washington has successfully piloted a model known as I-BEST (Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training), in which students receive basic skills/GED training at the same time that they get trained for high demand jobs. Given that most GED testers take the exam to increase their earnings potential, we need to ensure that they are prepared to transition to the careers upon receiving their diploma – the test must be a milestone, not a destination.

CSS has identified more than eight separate funding streams that support GED preparation, each with its own eligibility requirements and program standards. Too few GED programs are integrated with or connected to the most important thing: what happens next for their students.⁵

³ From the New York State Department of Labor “Value of Education Calculator”, using 2007 data.

⁴ American Council on Education, GED Testing Service, “2007 Statistical Report.”

⁵ Treschan, L. and Molnar, C. “Out of Focus: A Snapshot of Public Funding to Reconnect Youth to Education and Employment.” Community Service Society, June 2008.

3. Recommendations for how we can improve our use of the GED in making our workforce more competitive and our economy stronger.

Although we are still in the process of developing our report and its recommendations, there are several areas where we see the chance for New York City to improve its GED system:

- *Making sure the right people are in the GED system.* This is only an issue for individuals under age 21, who still have eligibility left to receive a high school diploma. Even if high school reform overwhelmingly succeeds and reduces dropouts by fifty percent, we will still have 15,000 people per year who could not succeed in high school. For these young people, this will require a strong system of assessment and case management as well as a porousness between HS diploma schools and GED schools. Young people with low levels of confidence should be allowed to start in GED and be encouraged to move into diploma-granting programs as they begin to succeed.
- *Recognize that GED seekers demonstrate a wide range of skills.* Since most New Yorkers without high school diplomas have limited basic skills and are considered “pre-GED” while others lack English language fluency and are classified as ESOL, we should recognize that we will need a wide range of programs for students at different levels. For most, preparation for the GED will take considerable time.
- *Focus on transitions.* Attainment of the GED is only as good as the next step a person takes. All GED preparation resources should have this in mind. Programs should incorporate and connect to jobs and college. We can use example from other states, such as Washington, where all adult education funding supports programs that build basic skills while they prepare people for jobs or postsecondary education. This will require increased investments and coordination of existing workforce and adult education funds.
- *Improve the testing system.* Our testing system is inadequate, and we support the recommendations to reform the system that are within the report issued by Jacque Cook , including professionalization of testing procedures and increased funding for testing.⁶
- *Raise public awareness.* Finally, we need to get the word out about the GED – to potential students, who can benefit themselves and our economy by getting the credential, and to policymakers who need to understand the great value of a GED diploma.. This is the goal of our upcoming report.

There is no day more important in the life of someone who is unemployed or underemployed than the day that they wake up and say, “Today is the day that I am going to get back on track.” That day is important for our City in many ways: its economy, social fabric, and moral fiber. It means the possibility of a City less divided into the haves and have-nots; it means a more competitive workforce and greater tax revenues; and it means that we can offer all individuals a chance to succeed and contribute.

⁶ Cook, J. “Our Chance for Change: A Four Year Reform Initiative for GED Testing in New York City,” Dept of Youth and Community Development, June 2008.

Most people know very little about workforce development and the intricate systems of public funding of these services. They do, however, know about the GED, and recognize it as a first step. We need to take advantage of this place that the GED holds, and invest it with the resources to give everyone a real chance for success.