

Success with High School Dropouts

Milwaukee's community-based Journey House program helps dropouts prepare for G.E.D. tests.

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Twenty-five percent of the youth in the United States do not complete high school with their peers. For some, however, dropping out of traditional school can be the start of something good. It has been our experience that with the right approach and curriculum, these youth can be reached. In particular, we believe that grassroots G.E.D. (General Educational Development) high school equivalency programs provide a useful model.

Developed during World War II to allow soldiers to complete high school, G.E.D. exams have become widely used for certification of skills at the high school level. In 1980, approximately 500,000 people earned the equivalent of a high school diploma by passing the tests in math, reading, grammar, social studies, and basic science.¹ Overall administrative responsibility rests with the American Council on Education but each state sets fees, picks testing sites, and so on. A key feature of G.E.D. programs is that testing is done at a designated public agency so that preparation for the exams is physically and psychologically removed from the certification process. Since the tests are standardized across the nation, a wide range of G.E.D. preparation materials, most in a self-study format, has been developed and intensively marketed.

The Journey House G.E.D. Adult Basic Education Program

Our program in Milwaukee is housed and administered by Journey House, an inner-city community center located in a neighborhood with a mixture of poor and working-class whites, Latinos, and more recently Asians. Established in February 1982 as a cooperative effort

between Journey House and the local technical college, our program serves youth ages 16-21 who have not completed high school or who need to upgrade their academic skills. To date, over 100 neighborhood residents have participated in the program and we currently have an active enrollment of 41 and a waiting list of almost 20.

An 18-month budget of \$40,000, funded by a Wisconsin basic skills improvement grant, pays for teaching staff salaries and learning materials. Our staff consists of one full-time instructor and three part-time tutors. Two of the tutors, long-time area residents, attended a neighborhood high school, while the third recently completed his G.E.D. through another neighborhood program.

Classes are small, usually no larger than 12, to ensure that every participant receives the personal attention promised upon entering the program. To begin, we interview all new participants to determine their goals, interests, and educational backgrounds. During the interview, we:

- Emphasize that, no matter what their previous record, this program is an opportunity to catch up on basic aca-

demical skills and gain more control over their lives.

- Explain that the initial assessment procedure is not grade-correlated, but rather diagnostic, with tests in mathematics, reading, and basic writing skills to locate specific deficiencies and provide information for planning clear-cut, skill-oriented goals.

- Allow participants, space permitting, to select one of the three class periods that best suits them—mornings, afternoons, or evenings.

After a person has completed the three diagnostic tests, the staff members write up a set of long-range individual goals. We break the goals down into a series of weekly objectives and construct lesson plans for each goal. We review specific goals for each day's coursework before a participant begins, and follow up the work with mastery exercises to provide what we consider a necessary sense of accomplishment. We also emphasize that the pace of their progress depends not just on their skill levels but on how much work they complete outside of class. Homework is not mandatory, but nearly all participants work outside of class, especially on review and skill exercises. Many participants make rapid progress this way, even though they are in class for only two-and-a-half hours a day, three to four days a week.

For participants whose skill levels are below those needed to handle G.E.D. materials, we work on functional skills in reading, applied mathematics, and writing skills. The academic curriculum for each participant depends on the individual's reason for entering the program; some want to upgrade math skills

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for job advancement, others want to improve reading skills to pass a written driver's test. We always stress practical uses of basic academic skills so that even if participants leave the program without having attained the G.E.D., they have gained something useful and have acquired a new sense of their capabilities.

One final program component worth mentioning is child care. Many young women who dropped out because of pregnancy find it difficult to participate in continuing education programs because they can't afford child care. Moreover, the programs are often not flexible enough to allow for the periodic crises experienced by single parents. To address these problems, we provide child care during classes at no cost to program participants (using mainly volunteer help), and provide home-study packages so parents can complete their programs even when they can't attend classes.

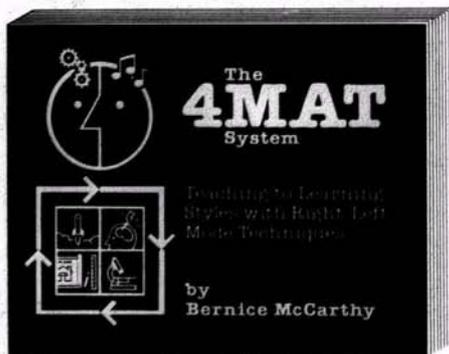
Conclusions

What have we learned from our program? First, educators who are willing to try new approaches can help dropouts. Young people from the Journey

House program who had never considered education beyond high school have sought information on courses at local technical colleges and universities in Milwaukee. Of the 26 participants who had completed the G.E.D. tests by the end of 1982, six are enrolled in college programs. Seventeen former participants are now employed by local businesses and several have entered skill-training programs in chemical technology, metallurgy, and secretarial skills.

Second, while self confidence and motivation are more difficult to quantify, we see improvement in our participants and believe it comes from the informal nature of our program, the practical nature of the curriculum, and its location in a community center that provides important role models, support services, and contacts with community resources.

Third, the traditional high school, no matter how it is modified, may not be the best mechanism for reaching dropouts. Educational recovery may occur best as part of the continuing work of community-based organizations. Furthermore, systems of grades and credits—almost unavoidable within a public school program—are insuperable obstacles to a dropout. We suggest that a community-based G.E.D. program, where preparation is psychologically and physically removed from the certification process, allows participants to transcend any negative attitudes toward learning that led to the original “dropping out.” This is not to say that public schools can't assist such programs or that traditional educators can't find a place in such programs. It is only to suggest that the time may have arrived for the locus of control to shift from the public school system and the traditional teacher to grassroots organizations staffed with youth workers who are familiar with the norms and lifestyles of high school dropouts. □



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‘This figure was cited in the National Public Radio series entitled “High School Dropouts.” A transcript of these programs, which are full of interesting case studies and which go a good way toward undercutting the received opinion that only “losers” take the G.E.D. route, can be obtained by writing to Options in Education, 2025 M Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

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