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Characteristics of GED Recipients in High School: 2002–06

The General Educational Development (GED) credential is often considered to be the equivalent of a high school diploma for students who do not graduate from high school. A GED credential can expand opportunities in the labor market (Song and Hsu 2008) and in postsecondary education for those who obtain it. Nearly all postsecondary institutions (98 percent) that require high school diplomas for application purposes also recognize the GED credential as sufficient to meet minimum educational requirements (American Council on Education 2008).

Nonetheless, GED recipients do not enroll in postsecondary education at the same rate as do high school graduates. For instance, more than 64 percent of students who graduated from high school in 2003 were enrolled in a 2- or 4-year institution of higher education in 2003 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2004). By comparison, a study of 2003 GED recipients found only 31 percent of GED recipients enrolled in a postsecondary institution within 5 years, and the majority of those enrolled for just one semester (Patterson, Song and Zhang 2009). Similarly, GED recipients do not fare as well as high school graduates in the labor market, where GED recipients have relatively lower future earnings (Heckman, Humphries, and Mader 2010).

While GED recipients may not realize outcomes equivalent to those of high school graduates, GED recipients fare better on several outcomes—including future earnings, life satisfaction, levels of depression, and substance abuse—than do high school dropouts who do not obtain the credential (Ou 2008; Heckman, Humphries, and Mader 2010).

Previous research has examined high school graduates, GED recipients, and high school dropouts without a GED for differences in demographic characteristics and outcomes after high school. However, differences that are apparent during the years leading up to graduation are of particular interest to educators and policymakers because students' progression toward or away from graduation occurs during this time. Thus, this Issue Brief compares GED recipients to high school graduates and dropouts without a GED, during high school. First, the brief describes various demographic characteristics of GED recipients (i.e., gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, native language, family composition, and parents' highest level of education). Second, the brief compares GED recipients to high school graduates and dropouts without a GED by 10th-grade participation in school, academic achievement, and plans for postsecondary education 2 years later, in 12th grade. Finally, the brief explores the reasons GED recipients reported for leaving high school and obtaining a GED credential.

The Issue Brief draws on data from the base-year study and first and second follow-ups of the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002). The ELS:2002 is conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, which is part of the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, and contains data from a nationally representative sample of public and private school students who were 10th-graders in spring 2002. By 2006, about 4 percent of 2002 high school 10th-graders had obtained a GED credential, compared to 88 percent who had earned a high school diploma, 5 percent who had dropped out, and 3 percent who did not fall into any of these three categories at that time (Dalton, Glennie, and Ingels 2009).¹

Distribution of Students by High School Completion Status and Select Characteristics

In this comparative analysis, respondents are categorized by their completion status as of spring 2006: graduates (respondents who had earned a high school diploma); GED recipients; and dropouts (respondents who had no credential, were not in high school, and were not pursuing a GED). These categories only hold for one point in time, spring 2006, since students who are considered dropouts in 2006 may receive a GED later. Further, the ELS data cannot capture dropouts who left school prior to the 10th grade, and thus these categories represent the cohort of 2002 10th-graders who graduated, who dropped out, and who received a GED. Students who had received a certificate of attendance, were still enrolled in high school, or were still working towards a GED were not included in the comparative analysis.

A comparison across the three types of students reveals that GED recipients fell between graduates and dropouts on some measures of socioeconomic status (SES) and parental education. A lower percentage of GED recipients than graduates were in the highest SES quarter (14 vs. 27 percent) and had parents with a college degree or more (27 vs. 40 percent), but a higher percentage of GED recipients than dropouts were in the highest SES quarter (14 vs. 5 percent) and had parents with a college degree or more (27 vs. 18 percent) (table 1). Meanwhile, compared to GED recipients, a

Table 1. Percentage distribution of spring 2002 10th-graders, by high school completion status and selected characteristics: 2006

Characteristics	Completion status in 2006		
	High school graduates	GED recipients	Dropouts
Sex			
Male	48.5	59.0	59.7
Female	51.5	41.0	40.3
Race/ethnicity ¹			
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.9	2.1	2.5
Asian/Pacific Islander	4.1	2.0	1.9
Black	13.3	15.5	17.8
Hispanic/Latino	14.2	15.5	33.0
More than one race	4.4	7.3	5.2
White	63.1	57.7	39.7
Socioeconomic status ²			
Lowest quarter	22.2	34.7	55.2
Middle two quarters	50.8	51.1	39.7
Highest quarter	27.0	14.2	5.1
Native language			
English	86.8	88.4	70.7
Non-English	13.2	11.6	29.3
Family composition			
Mother and father	60.0	38.8	35.6
Mother or father and nonparent guardian	15.4	20.1	23.0
Single parent	20.8	32.3	31.3
Other	3.8	8.7	10.2
Parental education			
High school or less	25.4	32.3	55.0
Some college	34.3	40.5	27.3
College degree or more	40.3	27.2	17.6

¹ Interpret data with caution. Standard error is larger than one-third of the estimate.

² Asian/Pacific Islander includes Native Hawaiian. Black includes African American, and Hispanic includes Latino. All race categories exclude Hispanic or Latino origin.

³ The composite socioeconomic status score on which the quarters are based derives from five equally weighted, standardized components: father's/guardian's education, mother's/guardian's education, family income, father's/guardian's occupation, and mother's/guardian's occupation.

NOTE: "GED" stands for General Educational Development exam. Detail may not sum to totals due to rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002), "Base Year, 2002," "First Follow-up, 2004," and "Second Follow-up, 2006."

higher percentage of dropouts and a lower percentage of graduates had parents with a high school degree or less.

GED recipients were not measurably different from dropouts in terms of sex or family composition, but both groups differed from high school graduates on these measures. Compared to graduates, higher percentages of GED recipients and dropouts were male (48 vs. 59 and 60 percent, respectively), from the lowest SES quarter (22 vs. 35 and 55 percent, respectively) and from single-parent families (21 vs. 32 and 31 percent, respectively); lower percentages were female (52 vs. 41 and 40 percent, respectively), Asian/Pacific Islander (4 vs. 2 and 2 percent, respectively), or from homes with both mothers and fathers present (60 vs. 39 and 36 percent, respectively). Meanwhile, for some characteristics, graduates and GED recipients did not measurably differ, but dropouts differed from both. For instance, higher percentages of dropouts than graduates or GED recipients were

Hispanic (33 vs. 14 and 16 percent, respectively) and were not native English speakers (29 vs. 13 and 12 percent, respectively), while lower percentages were White (40 vs. 63 and 58 percent, respectively), in the middle two SES quarters (40 vs. 51 and 51 percent, respectively) or in the highest SES quarter (5 vs. 27 and 14 percent, respectively) and had parents with some college education (27 vs. 34 and 41 percent, respectively). In total, these comparisons show that GED recipients are similar to dropouts on some measures, similar to high school graduates on others, and fall between dropouts and high school graduates on measures of SES and parental education.

GED Recipients' High School Participation and Academic Achievement

High school participation. In general, GED recipients differed more from graduates than from dropouts in their high school coursework participation. For example, the majority of high school graduates (53 percent) participated in a college preparatory program, whereas 51 percent of GED recipients and 52 percent of dropouts participated in a general education high school program² (table 2). Similarly, higher percentages of GED recipients and dropouts than graduates took a remedial mathematics class (15 and 15 vs. 9 percent, respectively).³

GED recipients were distinct from both dropouts and high school graduates in terms of their perceived importance of education when they were in the 10th grade. Higher percentages of GED recipients than dropouts indicated education was not important, and comparatively lower percentages indicated that education was either somewhat or very important. Compared to both GED recipients and dropouts, high school graduates had the lowest percentage indicating education was not important, and the highest percentage indicating it was somewhat to very important.

Academic achievement. In grade 9, GED recipients differed from both dropouts and graduates in terms of grade point average (GPA). The percentage of GED recipients with a 2.0 or lower GPA in grade 9 was smaller than that of dropouts, but larger than that of graduates (58 vs. 68 and 18 percent, respectively).⁴ By grade 10, the percentage of GED recipients with a 2.0 or lower GPA had increased such that there was no measurable difference between GED recipients and high school dropouts; however, compared to graduates, higher

Table 2. Percentage distribution of 2002 10th-graders, by high school completion status and participation in high school programs and classes, academic achievement, and plans for postsecondary education expectation: 2002, 2004, and 2006

Characteristics	Completion status in 2006		
	High school graduates	GED recipients	Dropouts
Participation in high school programs and classes in 2002			
General education program	36.6	51.2	51.6
College preparatory/academic program	53.4	35.0	32.5
Vocational program	10.0	13.8	15.9
Attended a special education program	7.5	8.2	16.2
Never attended a special education program	92.5	91.8	83.8
Took a remedial English class	7.8	11.1	14.2
Never took a remedial English class	92.2	88.9	85.8
Took a remedial mathematics class	9.1	14.5	15.5
Never took a remedial mathematics class	90.9	85.5	84.5
Regard for education in 2002			
Education not important	15.2	36.6	26.7
Education somewhat to very important	84.8	63.4	73.3
Academic achievement			
Grade 9 GPA: 2.0 or lower	18.0	58.4	68.2
Grade 9 GPA: 2.1 to 2.5	17.6	18.1	20.0
Grade 9 GPA: above 2.5	64.4	23.6	11.8
Grade 10 GPA: 2.0 or lower	19.6	73.2	74.5
Grade 10 GPA: 2.1 to 2.5	17.3	12.7	16.6
Grade 10 GPA: above 2.5	63.1	14.1	8.9
Standardized test scores by quartile			
10th-grade standardized test score: 25th percentile or below	20.1	31.5	61.2
10th-grade standardized test score: 26th to 50th percentile	24.4	33.7	28.4
10th-grade standardized test score: Above 50th percentile	55.5	34.8	10.4

NOTE: "GED" stands for General Educational Development exam. "GPA" stands for grade point average. Completion status was determined by 2006 data and plans for postsecondary education were reported in the 2004 data. All remaining measures (i.e., Participation in high school programs and classes, Regard for education, and Academic achievement) are from the 2002 data. Detail may not sum to totals due to rounding. SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002), "Base Year, 2002," "First Follow-up, 2004," and "Second Follow-up, 2006."

percentages of both GED recipients and dropouts had a GPA of 2.0 or less. While 10th-grade GPAs suggest similarities between GED recipients and dropouts, standardized test scores from the same year reveal differences. The percentage of GED recipients in the bottom quarter of the standardized test score distribution was approximately half that of dropouts (31 vs. 61 percent, respectively), while the percentage above the 50th percentile was more than three times higher (35 vs. 10 percent, respectively). Meanwhile, a smaller percentage of GED recipients than graduates scored above the 50th percentile and a larger percentage scored in the bottom quarter.

Reasons Given for Leaving High School and Obtaining a GED

In the year the cohort was scheduled to graduate, GED recipients and high school dropouts were asked to report their reasons for leaving high school, and those who chose to obtain a GED were asked about their motivation to do so. A higher percentage of GED recipients reported leaving high school for a school-related reason (91 percent) than for a work-related reason (29 percent) or a family-related reason (26 percent) (table 3).⁵ Similarly, a higher percentage of dropouts left high school for a school-related reason (88 percent) than for a family-related reason (40 percent) or a work-related reason (37 percent). The four school-related reasons for leaving high school that GED recipients cited most frequently were that they thought it would be easier to get a GED (48 percent), they did not like school (44 percent), they were getting poor grades or failing school (39 percent), or they had missed too many school days (39 percent). Generally dropouts reported similar school-related reasons for leaving school, except that higher percentages of dropouts than GED recipients reported that they could not complete the courses or pass the tests needed to graduate (33 vs. 22 percent). For both GED recipients and dropouts, the least frequently cited school-related reason for leaving school was that they did not feel safe (9 and 10 percent, respectively).

The two reasons that GED recipients cited most frequently for obtaining a GED were personal, family, or social (71 percent) and to meet requirements for additional study (66 percent).⁶ The next most commonly cited reasons were job related: to train for a new job or career (51 percent) and to improve or keep up to date on a

Table 3. Percentage of 2002 10th-graders who completed a GED credential or dropped out of school, by reasons for leaving school and reasons for obtaining GED credential: 2006

Characteristics	Completion status in 2006	
	GED recipients	Dropouts
Reasons for leaving school		
School-related	91.4	87.6
Not getting along with teachers/students	27.3	32.4
Could not complete courses/pass test to graduate	22.4	33.5
Could not keep up with schoolwork	26.4	30.6
Did not feel belonged there	25.7	20.0
Did not feel safe	8.7	10.2
Did not like school	43.6	34.4
Missed too many school days	39.0	41.9
Thought it would be easier to get a GED	47.6	40.7
Was getting poor grades/failing school	39.4	39.4
Suspended/expelled	17.1	20.6
Work-related	28.6	37.4
Got a job	18.5	28.6
Could not work at the same time	18.5	23.1
Family-related	26.2	40.0
Had to support/care for family	18.5	29.0
Pregnant or became a parent	13.1	24.3
Reasons for obtaining GED credential		
Improve/keep up to date on current job	46.9	†
Train for new job/career	50.9	†
Required or encouraged by employer	23.1	†
Meet requirements for additional study	66.4	†
Improve basic reading/writing/math skills	35.8	†
For personal/family/social reasons	70.7	†
Program in which GED was earned		
Job training program	5.6	†
Adult education program	36.2	†
No program/just took the exam	42.0	†
Other	16.2	†

† Not applicable.

NOTE: "GED" stands for General Educational Development exam. Students could report more than one reason for leaving school and for completing the GED certificate.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002), "Base Year, 2002," "First Follow-up, 2004," and "Second Follow-up, 2006."

current job (47 percent). The least frequently cited reason was that an employer required or encouraged it (23 percent). When GED recipients were asked about the programs in which they had earned their credential, the two most common responses of four possible choices were that they had taken the exam without participating in a program or that they had participated in an adult education program. The least common method of earning the GED was through a job training program.

Summary

Based on a nationally representative sample of students who were 10th-graders in spring 2002, this Issue Brief found that the distribution of GED recipients, high school dropouts, and high school graduates differed by a variety of background characteristics. In terms of SES and the percentage of parents with a high school education or less, GED recipients fell between dropouts and graduates. In terms of the percentage Hispanic, White, whose native language was English, and whose parents had some college education, high school graduates and GED recipients did not differ from each other, but both differed from dropouts. However, GED recipients and dropouts differed measurably from graduates by gender, family composition, and the percentage who were Asian/Pacific Islander.

Overall, GED credential holders differed more from graduates than from dropouts on measures of school participation and academic achievement. However, patterns of GPA percentages suggest that GED recipients began high school with characteristics distinct from those of dropouts, but became similar to dropouts over time. For instance, in grade 9, GED recipients fell between graduates and dropouts in terms of having a GPA of 2.0 or lower; however, by grade 10, the percentage of GED recipients with a GPA of 2.0

or lower had increased, and no longer differed from high school dropouts. This shift in GPA percentages during high school suggests that for many GED recipients the movement away from high school graduation may be observable during their high school career.

GED recipients reported four primary school-related reasons for leaving high school: they felt it would be easier to get a GED, they did not like school, they were getting poor grades or failing school, and they had missed too many school days. Approximately two-thirds of GED recipients cited personal, family, or social reasons for obtaining a GED, and a similar percentage cited it as necessary to meet the requirements for additional study.

The results presented in this Issue Brief suggest there are distinctions between GED recipients, high school dropouts, and high school graduates not only in their demographic characteristics, but also in their academic development during high school. However, these distinctions are complex and show that in some aspects GED recipients differ from both dropouts and graduates, and appear more similar to either group in other aspects.

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Endnotes

- Nearly 3.4 percent of respondents did not fall into the three main completion categories by 2006, as follows: 0.45 percent had received a certificate of attendance; 0.94 percent were still enrolled in high school; and 1.99 percent were still working toward a GED in the spring of 2006.
- The type of high school program was self-reported by the student in 10th grade. The program choices on the questionnaire were "General education program", "College preparatory/academic program", and "Vocational program" (ELS:2002).
- Participation in remedial coursework was self-reported by the student as of 10th grade.
- High school transcripts were the source of the GPA data.
- Students who left high school without earning a diploma were asked why they left school. Respondents could provide more than one response.
- Respondents could provide more than one reason for obtaining a GED.

The Issue Brief series presents information on education topics of current interest. All estimates shown are based on samples and are subject to sampling variability. All differences discussed are statistically significant at the .05 level; this means a difference is discussed only if the probability that it is due to chance (i.e., sampling variability) is less than 1 in 20. No adjustments were made for multiple comparisons. In the design, conduct, and data processing of National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) surveys, efforts are made to minimize the effects of nonsampling errors, such as item nonresponse, measurement error, data processing error, or other systematic error. For more information on the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002), visit <http://nces.ed.gov/els>.

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