

STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION – TOPIC SUMMARY

Topic: Secretary of State's Performance Audit of the GED Preparation and Testing Programs

Date: April 12, 2013

Staff/Office: Camille Preus, CCWD

Sheronne Blasi and Nicole Pexton, Secretary of State Audits Division

Action Requested: Informational Only Adoption Later Adoption Adoption/Consent Agenda

ISSUE BEFORE THE BOARD:

The Secretary of State Audits Division recently conducted a performance audit on the General Educational Development (GED) programs administered by the Department of Community Colleges and Workforce Development (CCWD). The scope of the audit included both the GED preparation and GED testing programs.

Sheronne Blasi and Nicole Pexton, Secretary of the State Audits Division, will brief the State Board of Education on the audit with a focus on the audit recommendations.

BACKGROUND:

The Oregon Secretary of State Audits Division regularly conducts performance audits to ensure government accountability and that public funds are efficiently and effectively spent on public programs. A series of audits, of the state's education system, began in 2012. The audits included university tuition cost drivers, teacher preparedness for Pre-K through 12, and the adult GED program.

In 2010, there were approximately 340,000 Oregonians (11% of the population) without a high school diploma or equivalent, and Oregon had the fourth lowest 4-year graduation rate in the country for the 2010-11 school year. The audit of the adult GED program found opportunities to increase the number of adult GEDs obtained in support of the state's 40-40-20 education goal. The Secretary of State recommended that CCWD work with the Board of Education, the Oregon Education Investment Board, and the community colleges to develop a more detailed strategy for Oregonians without a high school diploma or equivalency. Continued collaboration is needed between high schools, community colleges, and other agencies and organizations to help ensure clients needing a GED are referred to local programs. The Secretary of State's audit also found more can be done by CCWD to facilitate the sharing of successful marketing and retention practices among the community colleges, and to increase public awareness of the value of obtaining a GED certificate.

Secretary of State Audit Report

Kate Brown, Secretary of State

Gary Blackmer, Director, Audits Division



Opportunities to Increase Adult GEDs In Support of 40-40-20 Education Plan

Summary

Making Oregon more competitive in an increasingly service- and information-based economy led business leaders and policymakers to institute a statewide educational goal that emphasizes preparing students to succeed in post-secondary education. In 2011, the Oregon Legislative Assembly set the following goals to be achieved by 2025:

- Ensure that at least 40% of adult Oregonians have earned a bachelor's degree or higher;
- Ensure that at least 40% of adult Oregonians have earned an associate's degree or post-secondary credential as their highest level of educational attainment; and
- Ensure that the remaining 20% or less of all adult Oregonians have earned a high school diploma, an extended or modified high school diploma, or the equivalent of a high school diploma as their highest level of education attainment.

In 2011, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that 340,000 Oregonians or about 11% of Oregon's population 18 years and older lacked a high school diploma or equivalent and additional students drop out of high school each year. Seventeen percent, or about 8,300 of the most recent 2010-11 cohort of students in Oregon either dropped out or completed 12th grade without fulfilling the requirements necessary to earn a high school diploma.

We found opportunities to increase the number of General Educational Development credentials (GEDs) awarded to adults in order to meet the goal that all adult Oregonians achieve at least a high school diploma or higher by the year 2025. Current strategies aimed at implementing Oregon's 40-40-20 education goal do not sufficiently address the education needs of adults that have already dropped out of school, nor do they address the needs of those that may drop out in the future.

We found that high schools do not routinely share with Oregon's 17 community colleges or other organizations any information about students who recently dropped out of high school. With this information, community colleges could attempt to contact former students about GED preparatory

programs and the exam. Instead, many of the community colleges largely rely on traditional marketing and outreach efforts such as distributing flyers or including GED class information in course catalogs and college websites. There also is little statewide marketing effort to publicize the value of adults obtaining a GED credential.

Community colleges have made significant efforts to encourage GED recipients to continue on to post-secondary education by providing a wide variety of services to overcome personal and educational barriers. However, we found a few community colleges have limited services for GED students, and that successful models could be better shared among the community colleges.

The community colleges and the state's Department of Community Colleges and Workforce Development (CCWD) have developed partnerships with other agencies and organizations to refer clients to GED programs when education is a barrier to employment. Yet, financial assistance to clients for educational purposes has been dramatically reduced over the last several years. Additionally, Oregon does not provide dedicated funding for GED testing, and state support to community colleges has been significantly reduced over the last several years.

National concerns about the rigor of the GED exam have led to changes to future exams starting in 2014, including alignment with emerging national education standards, and an additional performance level to certify that adults are ready for college and career. As with the existing exam, the new GED exam's minimum passing score will be set at a level where approximately 60% of high school seniors would be able to pass it. However, these changes may create additional costs and barriers to obtaining a GED credential.

Recommendations

We recommend that CCWD work with the State Board of Education, the Oregon Education Investment Board, and the community colleges to develop a more detailed strategy for Oregonians without a high school degree. In addition, continued collaboration is needed between high schools, community colleges, and other agencies and organizations to help ensure clients needing a GED are referred to local programs. More can be done by CCWD to facilitate the sharing of successful marketing and retention practices among the community colleges, and to increase public awareness of the value of obtaining a GED credential. The impact of the new GED exam, beginning in 2014 will need to be evaluated as well.



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February 4, 2013

Sheronne Blasi, Audit Manager
Oregon Audits Division
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Dear Ms. Blasi,

Please accept this letter as the formal response by the Department of Community Colleges and Workforce Development (CCWD) to the Secretary of State's audit conducted to determine opportunities to increase adult GEDs in support of the 40-40-20 Education Attainment Plan.

While CCWD is generally in agreement with the audit recommendations as potentially effective process improvement strategies to address the role of the GED credential in meeting Oregon's 40-40-20 education goal, I do want to comment on specific assumptions and the recommendations in the audit report.

Recommendation 1: Work with the State Board of Education, the Oregon Education Investment Board, and the community colleges to further develop a comprehensive strategy to address the role of the GED credential in meeting Oregon's 40-40-20 education goal.

CCWD believes that any strategy to support the GED role in the attainment of the 40-40-20 goal must include the allocation of categorical state funding to support the citizens of Oregon attaining the credential. This lack of categorical funding in Oregon is referenced on page 20 of the audit report.

Recommendation 2: Work with the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) and the community colleges to help facilitate the sharing of allowable information about students who have recently dropped out of high school or did not fulfill the requirements to earn a high school diploma for the purposes of providing them information about the GED program and exam.

CCWD supports the focus of this Recommendation as outlined on pages 10 and 11 of the report: there is opportunity to refer recent high school drop outs to community college GED preparation programs. Recent drop outs represent a relatively small percentage of the overall population of Oregonians who do not have a high school diploma or GED, but do represent the population for which there is likely to be accurate/up to date contact information.

Recommendation 3: Further facilitate the sharing of information and best practices used by community colleges and others to reengage adults without a high school diploma or a GED credential, retain GED students in preparatory programs, and encourage GED students to continue their college education.

The CCWD Leadership regularly engages with the 17 local Adult Basic Skills program directors in sharing best practices during the quarterly meetings of the directors group.



Recommendation 4: Continue to facilitate partnerships through discussions with other agencies and organizations to help ensure clients needing a GED credential are referred to local programs.

CCWD is developing an environmental scan to determine the relationships between the community college Adult Basic Skills programs and the WorkSource Oregon centers. The intent is to 1) identify the full array of resources available to lower skilled Oregonians; 2) enhance communication and improve referral processes between the ABS programs and the WorkSource centers.

Recommendation 5: Work with the community colleges to help increase public awareness of the value of obtaining a GED credential in order to achieve personal education and employment goals. Also, consider developing a statewide public awareness campaign for the GED program and exam.

CCWD will develop deliberate strategies to market the new GED test and to promote completion of the current test/credential by those Oregonians who have started their testing under the 2002 test series. This public awareness campaign will directly involve both community college GED testing centers and GED preparation programs. CCWD's Key Performance Measure 1 makes GED attainment an agency performance metric, and CCWD remains committed to encouraging all Oregonians who do not have diploma to complete the GED credential.

Recommendation 6: After the implementation of the 2014 GED exam, consider evaluating the impact of the exam and the additional performance level to determine whether recipients appear to be adequately prepared for the workforce and/or college.

The evaluation of the 2014 GED test will occur at several levels including nationally by GED Testing Service, at the state level through data from the development of the new longitudinal data system, and by community college Adult Basic Education programs whose goals include transitioning students to post-secondary education.

The new GED test has two performance levels: 1) high school equivalency and 2) endorsements in each of the four content areas for those who score considerably higher. These endorsement levels will, hopefully, assure that individuals who achieve these higher levels will be able to enroll in credit-bearing classes at community colleges. Since this is a new feature of the GED tests, the test will need to be evaluated to validate whether, in fact, this is true.

While CCWD will monitor interim evaluations of the new GED test, it will likely be several years before sufficient data exists and is collected to conduct an analysis as suggested in the audit report. At that time, we will determine whether such an evaluation is warranted.

Sheronne Blasi
February 4, 2013
Page 3

Finally, to reiterate, the department finds the processes suggested in the six recommendations potentially valuable strategies for the colleges and their community partners to engage in as they respond to the needs of adult GED students in their region.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Camille Preus". The signature is written in black ink and includes a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Dr. Camille Preus
Commissioner