

Changes to GED may impact those who want to take the test

By Diane Orson, NPR

When Toni Walker is not in Hartford, Conn., serving as a state representative, she can usually be found at the New Haven Adult and Continuing Education Center.

“We basically educate approximately 800 people a day,” says Walker, an assistant principal at the center. “It is open enrollment, so when somebody gets an epiphany and says, ‘I need to get my high school diploma so that I can get a job,’ they can walk through the doors, and they can get [their GED] here.”

From 9am to 9pm, the center’s classes are packed with people preparing to take the GED test. Steve Cober, a union carpenter for two decades, is one of them. “I come here to try to get my GED to go into ... something different than carpentry. Medical field or something like that,” he says.

For years, the GED has offered millions of people like Cober a low-cost second chance at a high school equivalency diploma. The test is updated every decade or so, but some particularly significant changes are planned for 2014.

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Last year, the GED Testing Service – part of the nonprofit American Council on Education – announced that it was merging with Pearson, a for-profit British company, and one of the largest educational testing companies in the world.

The merger, the testing service says, would help to generate

the money needed to revamp the test. The new assessment will be more rigorous and aligned with Common Core Standards, a set of uniform educational standards now adopted by almost every state. The test will be offered only on computer, and it will cost more.

Fees to take the exam vary by state, says Randy Trask, president of the GED Testing Service.

Administrators at the adult education center are concerned that the GED overhaul will make it harder for many test takers to complete the exam.

“Historically, states have chosen to subsidize the GED test; some partially and some in its entirety,” Trask says. “The state then chooses what to charge test takers for the test. And the state bears – or has historically born – all of the costs associated with the delivery of that test and the scoring.”

In Connecticut, it currently costs \$13 to take the GED. The actual price of the exam is closer to \$60, but the state subsidizes the balance. The price of the new test, however, will jump to \$120. And though Connecticut may pick up the difference for a while, state Rep. Walker says that probably won't last. As a result, she's worried the higher cost will hurt the low-income people the test is supposed to help.

“It is going to be prohibitive ... People come here with pennies and nickels, bringing us change to pay for their GED,” Walker says. “So it's going to be a class issue. People who have no money will never be able to actually take the GED.”

The New Haven Adult and Continuing Education Center has begun to ramp up its computer capabilities to prepare for the online exam. But Walker says the change presents another hurdle to students here: Fewer than 20 percent of them have computers at home.

“So if we don’t show them how to use a computer, they’re never going to be able to pass the GED, because they won’t be able to do it online – and that’s the way they’re going to be delivering the test,” Walker says.

Though the GED is by far America’s most popular high school equivalency credential, states are starting to explore other options. New York, for example, has put out a request for proposals to companies that might be able to create an alternative test.

Meanwhile, the new GED is scheduled to replace the current exam in January 2014.