GED no longer the only test in town

LAS CRUCES >> When it comes to high school equivalency tests, the GED is no longer the only game in New Mexico. What's more, many educators are singing the praises of the new state-approved alternative, the HiSET exam.

This week, Doña Ana Community College began administering the new test twice a week at its East Mesa Testing Center. School officials say providing an alternative to the GED was critical for the students they serve.

Pearson Education became the sole developer of the General Educational Development test in 2011. Pearson is also responsible for the controversial Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers exams, the standardized tests recently implemented in New Mexico public schools.

In January 2014, Pearson did away with the paper tests and moved to computer-based tests. When Pearson rolled out the new GED, the cost increased from $50 to $120 — a jump many educators felt was more than some students could afford.

At DACC, students had long shown a preference for paper tests. In 2013, the final year paper tests were offered as an option, the college administered 3,807 paper tests and 492 computer-based tests, with 587 students passing.

In 2014 — the first year of the price increase — only 768 students took the test, which also became more difficult. Of those 768 students, only 75 passed. So far this year, from January through June, 449 people have taken the GED exam, and 60 have passed.

"My impression of the new GED is not favorable," said Don Dutton, coordinator of high school equivalency at DACC. "With the increased price of the test, getting rid of paper tests and practice tests, and requiring a fair amount more
rigor — it's not much of an improvement. And the nationwide data backs this up. No one is passing it."

Dutton said students have struggled with the computer-only approach.

"Our students are pretty good with a mouse, or with their thumbs on a telephone, but are not necessarily proficient at keyboarding," said Dutton. "They're good with a computer, but the way the test is administered, the interface is a little intimidating."

An alternative

In February, the New Mexico Public Education Department approved the HiSET exam in an effort to expand access to high school equivalency testing. The test is developed by Educational Testing Service, a nonprofit organization that also administers the Graduate Record Examination, or GRE.

According to PED officials, the state statute changed during the 2014 legislative session to include broader language on high school equivalency. In response, the PED issued a Request for Applications in October to allow for other tests. ETS applied, and the application was formally approved in February.

HiSET is currently approved for use in 17 states, and offers computer and paper testing options in English and Spanish, according to Amy Riker, national executive director of ETS.

"Since states are to recognize other state's credentials for employment and education opportunities, all states should recognize HiSET scores for admissions," Riker said.

While the GED originally cost $120 to take, the HiSET costs only $75. This month, Pearson dropped the cost of the GED to $80. However, DACC officials said there's a $5 proctor fee for each of the test's four components, bringing the
"The average high school equivalency student has to overcome many education roadblocks that occur outside the classroom," Riker said. "Since a high school education is required for employment sustainability and the springboard to other educational, vocational and employment opportunities, it's imperative to have affordable and accessible options to eliminate barriers for test takers. ETS's mission as a nonprofit is to advance quality and equity in education, and the reason why many states came to ETS looking for a high school equivalency test alternative."

Elsewhere in the state, Dutton said Eastern New Mexico University-Roswell and Albuquerque GED have also begun offering the HiSet.

"They've been using it for months, and have seen a much higher passage rate," Dutton said. "They're seeing good results."

At DACC, only a computerized version of the test is being offered. However, other centers around the state are offering a paper version. Whether a testing center chooses to use paper- or computer-based testing is left to each center's discretion, according to PED officials.

**In Albuquerque**

Albuquerque GED, a nonprofit Adult Basic Education program in state's largest city, began training students to prepare for the HiSET in late April. The organization offers education and preparation to students, who they then refer to a certified testing center at Central New Mexico Community College or Youth Development Inc. Both administer the GED, but only CNM is offering the HiSET.

"One of the things we've had to impress upon our new students at orientation is
that there's really no such thing as 'getting your GED,'" said Jamie Bearden, education director for Albuquerque GED. "You get your high school certificate, and the GED is one test that you can pass in order to get it. Often we have to repeat it three or four times, because 'GED' is so deeply embedded in the vernacular."

It was also embedded in the state statute, Bearden explained. As such, until 2014 Pearson was the only provider legally allowed to administer high school equivalency exams in New Mexico.

"We really try to get them to understand that, whether you pass the GED or the HiSET, the results are the same. You can get a city job, you can go to the military, or you can apply for college."

She said students are given the option between the tests, and are often encouraged to take a practice test for each, to determine which they'd rather pursue.

"The students who are just coming in are overwhelmingly opting for the HiSET," Bearden said. "On the whole, we're finding that it's preferred. It's cheaper, and the passing rate is higher, and the preparation time is shorter."

**Passing the test**

DACC's Dutton said the time it takes for a student to complete the GED or HiSET coursework can vary widely, depending on their education level and how motivated they are.

"Our students come in with very different levels of motivation," said Dutton. "Some might have a baby on the way, and want to complete their GED to better provide for that child. In that instance, they're often highly motivated. And, at the other end of the spectrum, we may see students who have been ordered by
the court to complete their GED. In such cases, they may be less motivated."

Dutton said it's impossible to give an average amount of time it may take a student to complete his or her high school equivalency — regardless of which test they choose — but he said six months to a year is a typical time line.

According to Bearden, the average preparation time for the GED, before the 2014 change, was six to eight months. With the current test, students are preparing for a year or more.

"With HiSET, students are preparing for five or six months," Bearden said. "Students we have that are passing now have been in the program for less than six months."

**HiSET vs. GED**

Currently, HiSET is the only high school equivalency exam offered in seven states: Iowa, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Missouri, Montana and New Hampshire. It is among the options in 10 others: California, Hawaii, Illinois, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Wyoming.

Whether students complete the GED or the HiSET, the high school credential they receive will be the same. The student's transcript, however, will indicate which test he or she passed.

"With the rollout of the updated GED, all of us miscalculated," Dutton said. "We probably underappreciated the challenge that the computer interface, the higher price, the impersonality of the process, and the additional rigor would have on our students. We bought these common core textbooks, added student computer time to our curriculum, and trained up our teachers. We felt we were ready for it, but the students continue to struggle."
Now, when students begin at DACC, they are also encouraged to take a practice math test for both the GED and HiSET.

"We encourage them to try both, and see which one they feel most confident with," Dutton said.

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