

Chapter 10

What Should Be Done?

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10.1 What Should Be Done

Character and intellect are twin pillars supporting flourishing lives. American public policy neglects character and focuses on intellect. Achievement tests embody this vision. Scores on achievement tests have become the measure of man.

The GED program implements this vision. High school dropouts are certified to be equivalent to conventional high school graduates based only on their performance on an achievement test. Achievement tests do not measure many of the skills needed to graduate from high school, or succeed in life. The GED exam does not measure the skills that cause high school students to show up to school on time, persevere in tasks, follow rules and cooperate with their teachers or fellow students.

This book demonstrates the danger of our national preoccupation with achievement tests. As a group, GEDs are about as smart as high school graduates but lack the character skills of graduates. GEDs earn less than high-school graduates and drop out of everything they start. After adjusting for their greater cognitive ability, GEDs earn at the same level as other dropouts. The same deficits in skills that cause many GED recipients to drop out of high school cause them to fail to persist in marriage, employment or the military.

Character matters. It is an essential ingredient of successful lives. It can be measured. It can be fostered. Families, schools, and communities are major producers of character. There are effective programs that develop character and can supplement challenged schools and families.

Assessments of schools and skill development programs should be made more comprehensive. Achievement tests should be supplemented with objective measures of character that have been shown to predict important schooling, labor market, and social outcomes.

Character can be fostered without infringing on the autonomy of students or the sanctity of families. Many American families are struggling and need assistance. The programs discussed in this book are noncompulsory. Many engage parents on a voluntary basis.

Character education should complement cognitive education in schools. While preparing

for achievement tests might build some character skills, the skills so cultivated do not cover the wide range of character skills that are valued in the labor market. There is no evidence that preparing for the GED exam produces long-term gains in cognition or character.

Research in neuroscience, psychology, and economics shows that character skills are more malleable in adolescence than are cognitive skills. Although the early years are important for creating both kinds of skills, the greater malleability of character at later ages suggests that adolescent remediation efforts should focus on creating character. Mentoring and monitoring adolescents in workplace-based environments can foster skills by demonstrating their relevance.

This book has important lessons for public policy toward the GED program. The GED certificate is not equivalent to a high school degree. Counting GEDs as high school graduates hides problems and overstates American progress in raising high school graduation rates. Counting GEDs as high school graduates gives a misleading impression of the effectiveness of public policies. For example, the Job Corps was originally perceived to be a successful program in large part because it produced GED recipients. Long-term evaluations show that the Job Corps is ineffective. Faith in the GED motivates government efforts to funnel billions of dollars into failed programs. Belief that GED certification solves the high school dropout problem diverts policymakers from seeking effective solutions.

With its promise of a cheap route to high school equivalency, the GED induces students to drop out of high school. The GED program deceives and misrepresents its recipients. It bundles hardworking dropouts who have turned their lives around with people who are good test takers but who lack character.

Passing the GED test does not establish readiness for college. Of the GED recipients who attend college, half drop out in the first year, most in the first semester. Few GED recipients are adequately prepared for the rigors of college. Even hardworking and persistent GED recipients often struggle with college because they are several academic years behind high school graduates when they enter college. The promise of a college degree that motivates

many GED certifiers is usually unfulfilled. This deception is costly because students forgo earnings and pay tuition.

In 2014, the GED Testing Service will introduce a new GED exam. The new exam is computer-based and its content is aligned with the Common Core high school curriculum. The new exam will put more emphasis on problem solving skills and aims to better promote college and career readiness. The GED exam will not address the skill deficits that prevent many GED recipients from succeeding in college. Many GEDs will still lack character skills necessary for success. If the exam's content is more difficult, those who pass will have higher cognitive skills, yet, as shown in this book, more than cognition matters.¹ Making the exam more difficult in the cognitive dimension will not address the problem of deficits in character not captured by the exam.

America is a second-chance society. The GED program should be retained as a second-chance option for those who want to turn their lives around. Women appear to be the primary beneficiaries, although even for them any benefit from GED certification comes mainly through opening doors and facilitating access to jobs—not in securing higher paying jobs.

For most people, the GED offers false promises. While second chances should be encouraged, the second chance should not encourage failure on the first chance. High school students should not be encouraged to earn GEDs instead of completing high school.

GED certification should be more tightly age restricted. Many high school students have not matured. For this reason, there are age restrictions on drinking, smoking, joining the military, and driving. Raising the minimum age for GED certification would reduce the high school dropout rate. At the very least, high school students who plan to earn a GED should receive mandatory counseling so that they are well informed about the difference between earning a GED and completing high school. They should know the opportunities

¹Note that a shift towards problem-solving skills does not mean the new test will be harder for dropouts to pass. The difficulty of passing is determined by both the difficulty of the content and by the number of questions that test takers must answer correctly.

they foreclose by dropping out of high school. People who earn the GED as a stepping stone to postsecondary education should be warned that passing the GED test does not establish readiness for college.

10.2 Specific Policy Recommendations about the GED

We make the following specific policy recommendations about the GED.

- 1. GED recipients should not be considered high school graduates in social statistics or when evaluating the success of government programs. Counting GED recipients as high school graduates paints a false picture of the American educational system and conceals inequality. It also misdirects government funding.*
- 2. GED preparation centers should be eliminated from high schools. The minimum age required to take the exam should be raised, so that test takers are more mature when they take it. Students who plan to take the GED should receive mandatory counseling to inform them of the options that they are foreclosing.*
- 3. Refine the signal sent by the GED test to include assessments of character and to distinguish GED recipients with serious seat time and study time from other dropouts who GED certify.*
- 4. Recognize that the problems associated with the GED will not be fixed by raising the passing threshold on the same kind of achievement test. The 2014 GED exam may be more cognitively challenging, but it will continue to only test a subset of the skills necessary for life.*

10.3 General Policy Recommendations about Character Skills

We make the following general policy recommendations about character skills.

- 1. Character skills should be measured and integrated into school accountability systems and in evaluations of all skill programs. There are reliable ways to do so. The assessments of schools, preschools, and other skill-formation activities should be based on the objective inventories such as those suggested by Ralph Tyler (1940)—one of the creators of the modern achievement test—and operationalized and validated in the recent literature. This broader notion of assessment should recognize that all “tests” measure performance on tasks. Inventories of character should be based on what is revealed from behavior. The distinction between “tests” and “behaviors,” while entrenched in the psychology literature, is misleading and falsely elevates the importance of measures based on tests (including self-reports of personality and reports by observers) over measures based on behaviors.*
- 2. Recognize that families are major producers of character skills, that schools work with what families send them, and that many American families are stressed. Programs that support family life and that encourage parenting and parent-child attachment are effective in promoting both cognitive and character skills.*
- 3. Secular programs to foster moral and character education in schools should be implemented and evaluated. These efforts can compensate, in part, for the challenges facing modern American families. Introducing discipline in the school will likely build character skills.*
- 4. Recognize that effective adolescent remediation programs should focus on promoting character skills. Encourage workplace-based adolescent remediation programs that fos-*

ter character and that recognize the greater malleability of character skills than cognitive skills at later stages of childhood.

Bibliography

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