

Best practices and recommendations

(continued from inside pages)

4) Increase access to the Official GED Practice Test (OPT) and test sites

The OPT enables teachers to tailor instruction, motivates students, and accurately gauges readiness to test. Rural GED candidates should have opportunities to take the OPT. In addition, 11 of 48 rural PA counties have no GED testing sites, and 22 counties have only one testing site.

Strategies:

- PDE - Bureau of ABLE could coordinate with rural institutions (e.g. libraries, schools, community colleges, community action agencies, county extension offices, employers) to offer the OPT free of charge or for a nominal fee.
- Ensure that a qualified person will score the OPT, interpret the results, and direct candidates to appropriate classes, if needed.
- Encourage adults to take the OPT by partnering with companies to offer raffle prizes such as free GED Test registration for people with passing OPT scores.
- Establish more GED testing sites and/or more frequent testing in rural PA regions.
- Create one web page with information about GED Test Centers (including dates, times, and fees) and ensure that all links of the PDE website direct to this single page.

5) Ensure that data reporting systems reflect DL student achievement

Due to the federal reporting requirements, ABLE-funded programs only receive credit for a student passing the GED Tests if the program sets the GED as the student's goal. The GED can only be set as a goal in the e-Data reporting system if the staff believe the student will pass the GED *within the current program year*. Programs do not receive credit for DL or face-to-face students who pass the GED Tests but do not have the GED goal set in e-Data.

Strategies:

- Consider revising state and federal reporting procedures so that programs receive credit for every student who passes the GED Tests, regardless of their e-Data goal.

6) Increase funding for DL GED instruction, provide ongoing professional development in DL, and support research on best practices

Program staff emphasized the need for increased state funding for adult education and DL. Distance teaching also requires additional skills beyond classroom instruction.

Strategies:

- Use innovative funding strategies and collaborations to allow agencies to advertise more intensively, expand DL services, serve more students, hire more teachers, support case management, and participate in professional development.
- Provide ongoing professional development and technical support to enhance distance learning integration and innovation.

Improving and Expanding Distance Learning Options for GED® Students in Rural Pennsylvania

PENNSTATE



Investigating distance learning options for rural GED students

The purpose of the study was to investigate the types, usage, and effectiveness of distance learning (DL) for rural Pennsylvania GED students. Specifically, the study sought:

- (1) to identify the types and usage of GED distance education in rural Pennsylvania;
- (2) to describe the demographic characteristics and participation patterns for rural GED students in DL and face-to-face classes;
- (3) to determine the effectiveness of DL in preparing rural students to pass the GED Tests;
- (4) to assess the cost of DL provision; and
- (5) to examine the advantages and disadvantages of DL for GED study.

Recommendations for creating DL options that best support rural students' GED preparation were developed from the findings and review of the literature.

A brief summary of the key findings and research-based strategies for practice begin on page 2.



About the study

In 2009-10, a research team led by Dr. Esther Prins of Penn State's Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy, investigated how distance learning (DL) is used by rural Pennsylvanians preparing for the GED Tests.

Researchers analyzed data from 975 rural GED distance learners (7/04 to 12/08), reviewed literature, and interviewed 9 DL program staff, 17 students, and a key informant.

The research team explored distance learning GED classes provided by:

- PA Department of Education, Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education;
- community colleges;
- community-based organizations; and
- a public broadcasting station.

Researchers:

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This project was made possible, in part, by a grant from the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, a legislative agency of the Pennsylvania General Assembly.

Advantages and challenges of DL: Teacher and student perspectives

- Advantages:**
- ▶ Overcome barriers to face-to-face attendance
 - ▶ Provide convenience & flexibility
 - ▶ Serve students when budget cuts eliminate community classes
 - ▶ Meet preference for self-paced, independent study
 - ▶ Personalized attention for students
 - ▶ Meet students' desire for confidentiality regarding the lack of a high school diploma
 - ▶ Increase intensity of instruction for face-to-face learners
 - ▶ Enroll learners who may not be able to attend face-to-face classes
 - ▶ Potential to increase enrollment, retention & program performance

Challenges:

- ▶ Limited access to computers, Internet
- ▶ Limited awareness of DL availability & value
- ▶ Student isolation
- ▶ Difficulty motivating students
- ▶ Inadequate funding
- ▶ Maintaining contact with students
- ▶ Time intensive
- ▶ Students may become easily frustrated or delay their studies
- ▶ Delayed feedback for students

Key research findings

A large number of rural Pennsylvanians could benefit from distance learning. Only 4% of the rural GED students served by ABLE-funded programs participated in DL (7/04-12/08). Three-fourths of these learners had DL and face-to-face instruction.

Students' computer access and internet speed are key factors in determining use of online or print-based materials. Of the students using online materials, 86% had Internet access at home, compared to only 25% of those using print materials.

Participants in rural GED DL programs tended to be young (median age = 22) women who wanted to enter or retain employment. Approximately 1 in 11 rural GED distance learners is an inmate. Compared to rural, face-to-face GED students, distance learners were more likely to be female (65%), low-income (60%), and have a higher entry education level.

Distance learners were as likely to show educational gain and to pass the GED® Tests as face-to-face learners. Nearly 75% of rural DL students passed the GED Tests, compared to about 70% of all test-takers in PA and 73% nationwide (2008).

Due to differences in delivery systems, instructional formats, and other factors, there was a wide range of cost per student (\$60 - \$2,500). The average cost for ABLE-funded students (\$361 to \$688) is comparable to other states. Costs included staff time, instructional materials, and postage, among others.

Best practices and recommendations

1) Launch a GED and DL publicity campaign
GED media campaigns in other states have been successful in reaching urban and rural adults. An aggressive multimedia campaign in English and Spanish will increase awareness of the benefits of the GED credential and of DL services. Funding from the state or a combination of corporate, philanthropic, and public sources is crucial.

Strategies:

- Use tools such as print, TV, radio, and online social media (e.g. Facebook, YouTube) to reach a wider audience.
- Target GED publicity toward young adult dropouts and collaborate with organizations that work with out-of-school youth.
- Increase legislative awareness of and support for DL and GED preparation.

Best practices and recommendations, continued

2) Create the infrastructure and provide the resources required for successful DL GED study

Students need technological, financial, social, and academic resources to take advantage of, and flourish in, DL classes.

Strategies:

- Expand rural students' access to high-speed Internet and computer technology, for instance, through state funding or partnerships with corporations and foundations.
- Train students in how to use technology.
- Provide supports such as case management services, transportation for occasional face-to-face meetings, and an online service where DL students could pose questions to any ABLE instructor.
- School districts or other organizations could provide distance learning students with access to computers after school or lend laptops.
- Identify effective ways to establish a learning community among print-based learners who may feel isolated.
- Policy makers could consider a state tax credit for GED candidates studying at a distance, similar to the higher education tax credit.

3) Expand and enhance distance learning options for GED preparation

Nearly 1,000 rural PA adults participated in distance learning through the PDE Bureau of ABLE in 2004-2008, but many other learners can be reached.

Strategies:

- Create an accelerated DL GED course for academically qualified candidates.
- Direct rural GED candidates to assessments aligned with the GED Tests.
- Expand the types of sites where individuals can study for the GED Tests via DL (e.g., libraries, workplace).
- Widen the range and clarify the policies on ABLE-approved DL instructional materials, including supplemental materials.
- Link distance learning GED instruction to postsecondary opportunities.
- Protect rural residents from unauthorized online GED credential programs.

Additional best practices and recommendations are continued on the back page.

Having my GED has improved my self-esteem. There is hope. There is nothing stopping me. I know that anything is possible.

~ Linda W., GED Distance Learning Student