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## EVALUATION OF A LOCAL ADULT GENERAL EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (GED) PROGRAM

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EVALUATION OF A LOCAL ADULT GENERAL EDUCATIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT (GED) PROGRAM

By

DérNecia A. Phillips

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College of the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Educational Administration

Under the Supervision of

Tamara J. Williams, Ed.D., chair

Omaha, NE

March 2023

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## **Abstract**

# **EVALUATION OF A LOCAL ADULT GENERAL EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (GED) PROGRAM**

DérNecia A. Phillips, Ed.D.

University of Nebraska, 2023

Advisor: Dr. Tamara J. Williams

The General Educational Development (GED) is a high school equivalency credential sought after by millions of Americans who do not hold a traditional high school diploma. This program evaluation offers insight to a local adult GED program as it seeks to increase the retention and GED completion rates of the students in their program. The evaluation utilized a participatory approach and qualitative design, with document review and semi-structured interviews as the primary data sources. Thematic analysis was utilized to organize evaluation results into themes representing areas of effectiveness and improvement. The recommendations include addressing learner barriers through individualized education plans, focused skill development, peer support structures, highly engaged learning, learner pathways, team professional development, streamlining program processes, and fully leveraging program benefits.

### **Dedication**

“Somebody said it couldn’t be done...but I began to sing as I tackled that thing that couldn’t be done, and I did it!” -Edgar Albert Guest

This dissertation is a work of heart, long suffered and finally revealed. As a woman of faith, I give full honor to God as the true source of my strength. I dedicate this dissertation to my family who travailed along with me through this process. My path took longer than most, and they continued to support me in the midst of all of life’s challenges.

To my husband, Trevin, thank you for motivating me in the last leg of this race. Your care for me is the love I never knew I needed and is more than I ever knew to hope for.

To my dearest, DaTéus, this, like everything I ever do, is for you, son. I thank you for bearing with me through the years it has taken me to finish. You, alone, know all the peaks and valleys of this journey and have loved me through them all. You make me so proud to be your mom!

To Grandma Betty, thank you for thinking through this topic with me and sharing your time, your love, and your personal GED story. You continue to inspire me.

To Mom and Brother, thank you for your continued prayers, encouragement, and support. Everybody deserves cheerleaders like you!

And to those I lost along the way, Dad, Dannette, Uncle Damon, Grandma Celeste, Auntie Nita, and Russell, I do this in honor of each of your memories. I hope it makes you proud!

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## **Chapter 1: Overview**

### **Statement of the Problem**

Having a quality education has many personal and societal benefits, yet over 20 million Americans over the age of 25 years old have not obtained their high school equivalency (HSE) credential (United States Census Bureau, 2022). The general educational development (GED) is an alternate pathway to receiving a high school credential, and over 800,000 testers take the exam each year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Preparing for the GED helps adult learners gain additional academic skills, and successfully completing the exam affords them the opportunities associated with holding a high school diploma.

GED completion has both individual and societal benefit, and its value can be classified in both economic and non-economic terms (McLendon et al., 2011; Song & Hsu, 2008). In the employment market, the GED holds value for completers. The economic value of obtaining the GED, for the individual, is in leveraging the credential into higher levels of education, career advancement, and increased earning potential (Jepsen et al., 2016). Whereas the decision to leave high school may have exposed leavers to the stigma associated with “dropping out” of school, making the decision to return to complete the credential may have a positive effect. Not only does holding the credential increase employment opportunities but it may also signify to employers in their sorting process (Stiglitz & Rosengard, 2015) that the GED earner has the determination and follow through needed to be successful in the workplace. In this way, having more citizens with a high school-level education increases the number of educated workers

(Jepsen, et al., 2016; McLendon et al., 2011). This provides the societal benefits of both a higher employment rate and a more highly skilled workforce.

Song & Hsu (2008) categorized the non-economic benefits of the GED into the categories of political and social participation, family literacy, and health. Other non-economic benefits associated with completing a non-traditional route to the diploma are the pride of completion and overall increased quality of life (Mitchell, 2015). Rose (2012) noted the social benefits of the GED such as improved health and crime reduction, while also noting the personal value of the growth in confidence testers experience as they gain new knowledge. Those seeking a GED noted happiness, personal achievement, family pride in their accomplishment, hope, and the ability to be a role model to others as significant non-economic benefits of GED completion (Bowen & Nantz, 2014; McLendon et al., 2011).

For the 11% of the population over 18 years old in the U.S. who have not completed their high school career (Salusky et al., 2021), there are negative ramifications associated with the decision not to complete high school. Not only have they not gained the full academic benefit of their school experience, but they may also limit their earning potential, career opportunities, and access to post-secondary education (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2010). The stigma of being a high school “drop out” can become a barrier to learners as they move forward in their work and educational pursuits. The negative impact for non-completers includes not only the external effects of decreased educational opportunity and earning potential but also extends to the intrinsic effects of unfulfilled accomplishments and limitations on future possibilities.

Research does not consistently show, however, that those who do not complete their GED experience lower labor market returns than those who complete their GED (Jepsen et al., 2016). Extensive research by Heckman et al. (2014) and Tyler et al. (2000), contends that GED completion grants no direct economic advantage over non-completion. Jepsen et al. (2016) cite a “growing body of evidence showing that GED recipients’ labor market options are essentially equivalent to those of similar high school dropouts” (p. 645). Although some research notes the positive effects of GED earnings for specific demographics (Tyler et al., 2000), the same researchers have found contradictory results in their later research (Tyler et al., 2010).

With conflicting research on whether the GED alone equates to additional earnings, the opportunity for GED earners to go to college becomes even more important. Federal financial aid requirements eliminated aid for students without a high school diploma or GED (Martin & Broadus, 2013), making the credential necessary for access to postsecondary education (Bowen & Nantz, 2014; Rossi & Bower, 2018; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2010). Jepsen et al. (2016) found that although there was not statistical significance in GED completion for long-term earning potential there was a “positive association between passing the GED and postsecondary enrollment” (p. 644). With each year of college equating to a 4 to 7% increase in annual income (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2010), GED earners who invest in their opportunity for advanced education increase their likelihood of higher earning potential.

With higher levels of education being linked to increased income, many adult learners cite financial mobility and earning potential as reasons for seeking the GED credential (Bowen & Nantz, 2014). According to the National Center for Education

Statistics (2022), median earnings for adults are directly related to educational attainment:

For 25- to 34-year-olds who worked full time, year round, higher educational attainment was associated with higher median earnings. This pattern was consistent for each year from 2010 through 2020. For example, in 2020, the median earnings of those with a master's or higher degree were \$69,700, some 17 percent higher than the earnings of those with a bachelor's degree (\$59,600). In the same year, the median earnings of those with a bachelor's degree were 63 percent higher than the earnings of those who completed high school (\$36,600). The median earnings of those who completed high school were 23 percent higher than the earnings of those who completed less than high school (\$29,800) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022, para. 1).

Access to higher education options that can lead to increased earnings, therefore, are a positive outcome of GED completion.

Even with the positive potential GED completion brings, one of the greatest challenges for the adult education community is the attrition rate in GED preparation programs (Salusky et al., 2021). Not only do participants leave programs at high rates but many enroll multiple times without ever attempting to take the exam. The issue of GED program attrition is complex and often takes into consideration that “many GED students struggle between the commitment to education and other responsibilities” (Liu, 2020, p. 86). The GED pathway is generally an interrupted process (Liu, 2020) for those who begin and is often laden with starts and stops along the way for those who persist to completion.

GED preparation programs, meant to help adult learners prepare to take the GED test, suffer from low enrollment, retention, and completion rates. Gopalakrishnan (2008) points out that most GED learners drop out of their programs within the first few weeks. Although the GED test can be taken, in most cases, without completing a preparation program (Hutek, 2017), the preparation activities offered in GED programs help learners review content and test-taking strategies before taking the assessment.

And while most high school dropouts eventually do continue their education — usually through adult education or GED preparation programs — too few of those who start GED programs ever pass the exam. (Martin & Broadus, 2013, p. 1). With approximately 40 million Americans without a high school diploma or equivalency degree (Martin & Broadus, 2013), quality adult programming to help bridge this gap is needed.

In addition to the concerns with adult preparation program attrition, the changes in the GED test itself have posed a problem for programs and testers. The introduction of the fifth edition of the GED exam in 2014, increased the complexity of the test (Anderson, 2017). GED test-taking declined by two-thirds and the success rate of those who took the exam dropped initially by 33%. The more challenging exam was meant to mirror the rigor of the high school College and Career Readiness Standards as well as ensure GED completers had the knowledge and skills to successfully navigate post-secondary options (Hutek, 2017). In increasing the rigor of the GED exam, however, the impact on the already educationally marginalized students (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2010) was that the goal of GED attainment became even more difficult to achieve.

With over 7,000 students dropping out of high school each day (Rossi & Bower, 2018), adult education funding low, and GED program attrition high, the adult education crisis has been dubbed the “silent epidemic” (Bridgeland et al., 2006). The education landscape for high school completion has improved over the last decade, leaving 8.9% of the non-institutionalized population over age 25 in need of a high school diploma (United States Census Bureau, 2022). To further reduce this statistic and increase the number of GED completers, quality GED preparation is needed now more than ever. GED completion, for those who need it, proves arduous for most and unattainable for many. Improving program effectiveness and adult learner support in GED programming is crucial in changing this narrative.

### **Local Review of GED Attainment, Access, and Support**

In the state of Nebraska, 92.2% of the population 25 and older hold a high school degree, leaving 99,000 Nebraskans without a high school credential (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). The 2020 Census reports 89.8% of the population in Omaha, Nebraska age 25 and older as high school graduates. The remaining 10.2%, about 32,000 adults, are those who have not obtained their high school diploma or equivalency (United States Census Bureau, 2020). Table 1 outlines the GED testing trends in Nebraska over the last five years. This information, provided by the Director of Adult Education and GED administrator for the Nebraska Department of Education, shows a decline in the number of overall GED testers between 2017 and 2021. Between 55% and 60% of examinees who took at least one of the four GED subtests each year went on to complete the exam, whereas those who successfully completed the credential compared to those who started the battery of tests ranged between 45% and 50% during this timeframe.

Overall, between 80% and 85% of testers who completed all four subtests earned their GED credential in the last five years in the state of Nebraska (T. Lauer, personal communication, April 15, 2022).

**Table 1**

*Nebraska GED Testing trends 2017-2021*

<b>Nebraska GED® Testing</b>	<b>1/1/2017 – 12/31/2017</b>	<b>1/1/2018 – 12/31/2018</b>	<b>1/1/2019 12/31/2019</b>	<b>1/1/2020 – 12/31/2020</b>	<b>1/1/2021- 12/31/2021</b>
Total number of examinees who took at least 1 of the 4 tests.	1400	1297	1244	816	1129
Total number of examinees who took their fourth test. (Completer)	811	765	697	451	640
Total number of examinees who passed the fourth test (Passed all - earned a diploma).	679	650	561	365	515
Completers who passed all 4 tests (earned credential)	84%	85%	80%	81%	80%

Although a preparation program is not required for testers 18 and over in Nebraska, those who choose to prepare for the exam have a variety of GED preparation programs within the Omaha city limits from which to choose for support. The list of testing sites is a much shorter list, however, than the list of preparation programs. Local testing sites and several preparation programs are listed in Table 2 (GED Testing Service, 2022; Onsego, 2022). The GED Testing Service (2022) lists four testing centers within a 50-mile radius of Omaha. Metropolitan Community College has three of the four sites at its South Omaha, North Omaha, and Fremont locations. The other testing site is located on the Southeast Community College campus in Lincoln, Nebraska. The Nebraska



Department of Education's Adult Education resources also list Creighton University as an official test site (Nebraska Department of Education, 2022).

**Table 2**

*Omaha area GED Preparation Programs and Testing Sites*

Name	Preparation Program	Testing Site	Description
Omaha Public Schools Adult Education	X		
Omaha Public Library	X		
Nebraska Department of Labor	X		
Learning Community Center of South Omaha GED Program	X		
Latino Center of the Midlands	X		Spanish GED classes
Multicultural Human Development Corporation	X		Adult basic education for adult students. Eligible farmworkers could be paid for class attendance. Must be at least 16 years old.
Metropolitan Community College (MCC) Adult Education	X	X *Main & South Campus	Several locations across the Omaha area including Heartland Workforce Solutions, South Campus, Spring Lake Magnet School, MCC Express-South, MCC Express-North, MCC Fort Omaha, Do Space, Millard Central Middle School, Millard South High School
Learning Community Center Parent Education (Pathways to Opportunity)	X		Parent pathway to GED credential
Omaha Housing Authority (OHA)	X		GED program offered free to OHA residents
Sylvan Northwest & Sylvan Omaha	X		

Goodwill of Omaha YouthBuild Americorps	X		
Creighton University Education Opportunity Center	X	X	
Learning For All	X		Classes located throughout the community and online
University of Nebraska-Omaha (Ed2Go Online)	X		

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to evaluate one local adult GED program (see Appendix A) as part of the program's continuous improvement process. Specifically, this study will address:

1. Who has been served in the local adult GED program?
2. How do adult learners describe their experience in the local adult GED program?
3. How do current processes connect with program outcomes?

### **Significance of the Study**

Program review is an essential component of continuous improvement. This program evaluation serves to guide the continuous improvement process for a local GED program. The program's review provides insightful information to assist program leadership in clarifying purpose, monitoring consistency, evaluating progress, and determining program effectiveness. The responses of the GED program participants and staff along with the findings from the document review, support program providers in making decisions for program improvement.

As an external reviewer using the participatory approach to evaluation, the role of the reviewer was to work closely with program providers in the evaluation process. The

value of collaborating with program providers is in their vested interest in program effectiveness. Additionally, their active involvement in the program evaluation was logical, as they hold nuanced understanding of the program. Shared participation in the process offered the benefit of the program providers' perspectives, while also offering the objective lens of the researcher.

This single evaluation will assist the local adult GED program in their program improvement and development as well as serve as an example of participatory program evaluation for other similar programs. It will allow program providers to learn more about the context in which their program is situated, apply relevant research to the continuous improvement process, and reflect on how their current practices are impacting program participants' outcomes.

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter two provides background literature to help position the study for the reader. Chapter three presents the evaluation design, data, and analysis plan. Chapter four presents the evaluation findings and Chapter five outlines implications for practice, program recommendations, and considerations for future research.

## **Chapter 2: Background Literature**

### **What is the GED?**

The GED, and consequently the GED test, are referred to by many names in educational literature. Although GED historically stands for General Educational Development, it is also commonly referred to as the General Educational Diploma, General Equivalency Diploma, and the Graduate Equivalency Degree (Anderson, 2017). Whichever variation of the name is used, the GED test is a high school equivalency exam taken by learners who did not graduate with a high school diploma. For seven decades, the GED was the only HSE test offered in the United States; however, in 2014 the High School Equivalency Test (HiSET) and Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC) became available. With the discontinuation of TASC in 2021 (Gromlich, 2022), the HiSET and GED are the two normed assessments of academic skills that can earn a high school equivalency diploma (Rossi & Bower, 2018), as specified by each state education department (the GED is offered in 41 states and the HiSET is offered in 26 states), for those who pass.

The tests that make up the GED are developed by the GED Testing Service, published by Pearson, and have evolved over time from a test of minimum basic academic skills to a more rigorous test incorporating higher level thinking and problem-solving (Hutek, 2017). Although the GED test has undergone multiple revisions since its inception in 1942, the most significant revision of the test's content occurred in the fifth edition of the exam published in 2014 (Bowen & Nantz, 2014; Liu, 2020). This edition changed the focus of the test to align more closely with the Common Core and College and Career Readiness Standards (Anderson, 2017; Bowen & Nantz, 2014). The impetus

of the change was to prepare learners more adequately for the rigors of college and the workplace, while also preventing them from requiring remediation in post-secondary settings.

The following overview of the most current GED information, including test format, content, procedures, and state-specific considerations was retrieved from the official GED website (GED Testing Service, 2022). By reviewing the information, it is apparent that in addition to the revision of content, the format of the exam also changed. The GED test is currently a computer-based test that can be taken in-person at an official GED Testing Center or completed online. The computerized GED test yields immediate test results upon completion of each of its 4 sub-tests in the areas of Mathematics, Language Arts, Social Studies, and Science. The complete exam is a total of seven and a half hours of testing; however, the sub-tests can be taken all at once or scheduled separately. Testing accommodations (e.g., extra time, breaks, smaller test setting, test read aloud) are available for those who qualify based on special needs. All test takers, however, benefit from the ability to pace their scheduling of the full battery of tests and can retake a subtest as many times as they need within a two-year timeframe to contribute to their composite score.

The subtests of the GED are further divided into test topics. The Mathematical Reasoning section includes basic math, geometry, basic algebra, and graphs/functions. One hundred fifteen minutes is allocated to take this portion of the test as well as a short break between each part of the sub-test. A calculator is permitted on select portions of the test and reference sheets with formulas are available for use. A variety of question

types are represented including multiple choice, drag and drop, fill-in-the blank, along with other question formats.

Reasoning through Language Arts is another sub-test found on the GED exam. This section is made up of reading for meaning, identifying and creating arguments, and grammar/language. Testers are given 150 minutes to complete the Language Arts sub-test, with 45 minutes dedicated to completion of an essay response. This test consists of one extended response, in the form of a written essay, as well as a range of selected response questions. It focuses on the skills and strategies needed to read and write both informational and literary text. This includes not only grammar and basic comprehension but also analysis of passages and synthesis of information.

The Social Studies sub-test is a 70-minute exam taken without a break. The topics covered in this sub-test are reading for meaning in Social Studies, analyzing historical events and arguments in Social Studies, and using numbers and graphs in Social Studies. An onscreen calculator is available for usage on the test in addition to use of a tester's own calculator meeting test specifications. The Social Studies assessment uses various question types and focuses on the application of social studies concepts and the interpretation of information rather than the memorization of facts.

The Science sub-test of the GED test focuses on higher level thinking skills in the sciences. The topics include reading for meaning in Science, designing and interpreting Science experiments, and using numbers and graphics in Science. Test takers are allotted 90 minutes to complete the Science portion of the test and can utilize both an approved calculator and reference sheet as testing tools. To experience success on this portion of

the test, testers need to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of scientific ideas and know how to analyze and interpret scientific information.

Scoring of the GED exam is regulated by The American Council on Education (ACE). ACE's Commission on Education Credit & Credentials sets the minimum passing score, while each state sets its own maximum passing score. The passing score in most states are within a very close range of one another. To obtain the GED credential, a 145 or higher is required on each individual sub-test. This is referred to as the GED Passing Score. With the most recent revision of the GED, additional scoring categories were added to include a GED College Ready score and a GED College Ready + Credit. The GED College Ready Score is a score of 165-174 in any test subject, indicating college readiness in the subject area. The GED College Ready + Credit score is a score between 175-200 in a test subject, which may qualify the tester to receive college credit based on their demonstrated knowledge.

The policies governing the GED test and its administration differ by state. In the state of Nebraska, the GED credential is called the State of Nebraska Department of Education High School Diploma and the policies governing the credential, outlined in Nebraska's Compulsory Attendance Law as well as Rules 81 and 82 of the State Administrative Code, are enforced by the GED administrator for the Nebraska Department of Education. Some of the basic policies include age and residency requirements as well as preparation pre-requisites. To qualify to take the exam in Nebraska, testers must be 18 years of age (unless they meet eligibility requirements set for 16- and 17-year-old testers) and withdrawn from high school. There is not a residency requirement to begin taking the test in Nebraska; however, a tester must live in

the state for 30 days before being awarded the full GED credential. Residency requirements for different states determine if a tester's scores will transfer across state lines before completion of the full battery of tests. Nebraska testers 18 and older do not have to attend Adult Education preparation courses before taking the GED; however, younger testers must receive a recommendation from a preparation program instructor to test.

In the state of Nebraska, some policies differ depending on whether the test is taken in-person or online. For in-person test takers, there is no requirement to take the GED Ready practice test before taking the GED test; however, online testers must take the practice test before they are able to take the GED exam online. Test center testers also benefit from the choice of completing all sub-tests in one day, while online testers may only schedule one sub-test at a time. Payment for the GED test also differs based on test format. Those testing at a Test Center pay less per module of the test and have the opportunity for the state to pay for their first GED test in each subject. Nebraska charges a discounted test center fee for in-person test retakes; however, online exam takers pay the full price for retakes.

### **Barriers to Test Completion**

One measure of a successful GED preparation program is the number of successfully passed GED tests. However, the issue of GED program attrition is complex. Those who begin the journey of adult secondary education to pursue a high school equivalency degree often face many challenges along the way. In fact, an estimated 70% of students who start a GED program do not successfully complete the GED test



(Holmquist, 2013). The following literature provides information about typical barriers to GED test completion.

### ***Residual Feelings About School***

When identifying reasons for adult learner difficulty in adult education programs, one significant consideration is prior school experiences. Many adult learners in GED programs cite negative school experiences as a reason for discontinuing their traditional high school education (Rose, 2013; Salusky et al., 2021; Schwartz, 2013). Mitchell (2015) pointed out that many learners on the GED track felt the school environments in which they attended high school were not conducive to learning and inhibited their desire and ability to learn. These experiences affected their mindset about school and ultimately their perspective on learning and themselves as learners.

In addition to policies and practices that contributed to learners' negative school experiences, the decision to leave school ultimately affects students' academic preparedness. Some of the reasons cited for leaving high school included lack of support, family history of dropping out, behavior problems, falling behind, social issues, attendance, and family circumstances (Anderson, 2017). Since most learners who later enroll in GED programs leave high school in either their ninth or tenth grade year, they are two years or more behind in their academic learning when they enroll in the program (Rossi & Bower, 2018). As adults re-entering the school environment, they are working from behind.

Adults...who are still trying to complete high school level work, often had the daunting task of gaining basic skills while managing work and family

life, in addition to academic challenges that previously made high school difficult (Holmquist, 2013, p. 1-2).

Without completing the full four-year academic program, students are returning to school settings underprepared for the rigors of adult secondary education programs.

The feelings surrounding individual adult's "drop out decision" are complex. Not all students left high school due to negative feelings about school. Some learners lacked confidence in their academic abilities, in their ability to navigate school through life challenges, or in the school's ability to meet their unique needs (Holmquist, 2013). In fact, some learners left high school hoping that "an alternative learning environment other than the traditional classroom might bring unexpected, better outcomes" (Liu, 2020, p. 93). In this way, GED program participants hold a wide range of residual feelings about their prior school experiences, which can serve as both barriers and motivators to their completion of GED requirements.

Schwartz's (2013) study examined GED programming as experienced by young men of color and gave insight from an alternate viewpoint. The young men in the study portrayed the GED education program as a counter space to high school. Some characterized traditional high schools as oppressive spaces in which they experienced significant trauma due to equity issues and the criminalization of students. In such toxic spaces, students expressed feeling they had been "pushed out" rather than having "dropped out" of school (Schwartz, 2013). Although these learners viewed their participation in the GED program as an act of resistance against a system that was designed for them to fail, the feelings about the experiences they had in their previous schools complicated their re-engagement in the learning process.

### *Time Away*

Returning to school after an extended absence is one of the obstacles that makes adult learning experiences challenging. Adult learners must reacclimate themselves to the role of student, while also managing competing life priorities. This transition is a major shift in mindset as a learner adjusts to balancing school, work, and life roles (Bellare et al., 2021). Work obligations, family commitments, life situations, and scheduling all contribute to adult learners enrolling, leaving GED programming, and later re-enrolling over the course of time (Shaw et al., 2015). The level of focus that is needed to be successful in GED preparation and testing is often arduous for adult participants who are trying to successfully complete the education they began in high school, while also shouldering the responsibilities of adulthood.

Adult learners who return to complete their high school equivalency after time away also contend with the establishment or redevelopment of their academic learner identity. Learner identity is a construct which involves an individual's perception of themselves as a learner, academic self-awareness, and confidence in their ability to learn (Kolb & Kolb, 2009; Parkinson et al., 2021). For some learners who did not finish high school, this identity as a student was never fully developed. For others, the time away from academic learning, disrupted their identity as a scholar (Smith et al., 2022). Re-engaging into an academic program to prepare for the GED exam, is often the first time many adult learners are reconnecting with their scholarly identity, which may now compete with other identities such as an employee or a parent. Brunton & Buckley (2020) explain that, for adult learners, "the greater the contrast between identities the greater the difficulty in switching cognitive gears, disengaging from one identity and

reengaging with another” (p. 2699). This idea highlights both the struggle and complexity adult learners face when balancing different “context specific” identities.

Liu (2020) found that the longer a student had been out of high school, the longer the time gap became between their re-enrollments into GED programming. It was also more likely that GED students who had recently left the high school setting would experience success in GED preparation programs and pass the GED test, when compared to students who had not recently been enrolled in a school program (Anderson, 2017). This time away from academic pursuits makes it more challenging for learners to re-establish the academic identity needed to successfully complete GED preparation and the GED exam. Transitioning back into an academic environment after time away creates what Smith et al. (2022) describe as a reconstructed or disrupted learner identity. The intellectual labor of constructing or reconstructing this disrupted academic identity presents a challenge to adult learners which is further complicated by the prioritization of the other identities they hold.

### ***Self-Efficacy***

Self-efficacy is a significant component of learner identity which is needed for GED pursuers to successfully reach their academic goals. Fenty (2019) cites Bandura’s seminal definition of self-efficacy as “the beliefs about one’s own capabilities to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task and produce levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect one’s life” (p. 28). Whereas general self-efficacy relates to confidence in one’s overall capabilities, academic self-efficacy relates to a learner’s confidence in their academic ability (Holmquist, 2013). This aspect of

learner identity represents a non-cognitive factor that can either enhance or detract from the learner's experience of success.

Many other factors contribute to a learner's sense of self-efficacy including mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasions, and physiological and psychological states (Fenty, 2019). Self-awareness and management are also important personal factors related to learner confidence. Left unmanaged, these non-cognitive factors can pose a significant barrier to achievement. Salusky et al. (2021) identified non-cognitive skills such as emotional coping skills, personal management, attitude, decision making, planning, perseverance, and relationships as critical to adult learner success. When these skills are not well-managed, they can manifest into self-defeating behaviors and emotions that have an adverse effect on learning and achievement (Holmquist, 2013). When presenting in the negative form, these non-cognitive factors may show up as lack of confidence in ability, the fear of failure, stigma conscious, and anxiety based on previous school experiences (Salusky et al., 2021). If left unchecked, these thought processes can inhibit the self-efficacy needed to move learner progress forward.

The lack of academic self-efficacy stalls adult learner progress. Both Goodwin (2002) and Quigley et al. (2011) classify this type of inhibitor as a dispositional barrier for adult learner progress. Dispositional barriers in this context are barriers related to the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions about learning and education (May-Varas, 2015; Rice, 2019) and include non-cognitive factors such as academic self-efficacy. The confidence level of learners greatly impacts persistence in GED programs, because learners need to believe that they can achieve their academic goals (Holmquist, 2013). Without an

established sense of self-efficacy or the opportunity for self-efficacy programming to embed mastery and vicarious experiences into the GED preparation program (Anderson, 2017), GED pursuers will have trouble seeing their goal to completion.

### ***Environmental & Situational Factors***

Personal barriers also influence learner success. Environmental factors can pose a threat to program completion and make it difficult for adult learners to achieve their academic goals. Rittberger & Monczunski (2020) researched a trauma-informed practice continuum of support for GED participants to address these environmental stressors negatively impacting goal attainment. They found that adult learners who struggled with trauma from environmental factors such as poverty, homelessness, and unemployment had the lowest completion rates in GED programs. The purpose of their research was to find ways to address the trauma experienced by the adults in the program so they could effectively balance their life challenges with their academic learning.

Situational factors also present obstacles for adult learners to overcome to complete their studies for the GED test (May-Varas, 2015; Rice, 2019). Goodwin (2002) & Quigley et al. (2011) define situational barriers as home and life situations that arise during an adult learner's educational journey which pose a challenge to completion. Life situations such as pregnancy, unexpected unemployment, divorce, illness, and death are all life events that can have a negative impact on a student's ability to concentrate on school or continue their program of study (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2010). Changes in situation can affect a participant's access to technology, childcare, transportation to class, familial support, or availability in their schedules due to increased work obligations.

The barriers that arise out of the learner's everyday lives are often the ones that can take them most off track. Whether familial, financial, or health-related, these challenges are ones that may take a student off course and are outside of the program's realm of control to fix. Quigley (1998) explains situational barriers as significant obstacles for GED program participants and the program's role in assisting them through these challenges:

We can try to help our students with the situations they face by referring them to resources. But we can only refer them, we can't be the resources. Situational barriers are often those about which we in ABE [Adult Basic Education] can do very little. This is an area where we need to realize our limitations and reduce the personal guilt we feel when we see our students floundering in the face of these barriers.

GED programs must recognize how to provide continued support to the students, while realizing what support lies within the program's realm of control.

### ***Personal Learning Needs***

The academic gaps and ability levels of adult learners entering GED programs also create a barrier to completion. The Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) is used as an academic placement test in many programs to identify participants' learning levels in each academic area. It allows the instructors to make instructional plans and decisions based on each learner's needs as well as determine what program or intervention is best suited for each participant (Liu, 2020). A lack of literacy and numeracy skills as well as other requisite foundational skills contribute to the challenges learners face in adult preparation classes (Anderson, 2017). Additionally, roughly 40% of students who leave

high school without a diploma have been diagnosed with special needs; however, many do not disclose their diagnosis or learning disabilities when they enroll in adult education programs. This presents a potentially invisible barrier which prevents educators from providing the needed supports and accommodations (Becker Patterson, 2013). Adult learners who struggle academically must advocate for themselves in order to receive the help they need to be successful.

Even when special needs are disclosed, unfortunately, many teachers in adult education programs do not have the expertise to accommodate the learners. Whether the need is adequate screening to determine needs or use of data to inform instruction (Becker Patterson, 2013), those who teach in adult education programs often have a paraeducator-level of education and experience and may have difficulty meeting the needs of the learners in their classrooms. The quality of instruction in adult education is uneven, and many of the people who do the work have minimal training. They are often volunteers who are relying on outdated and limited curriculum resources. Rose (2013) pointed out these program inadequacies and noted that “we have to do better by the educationally underprepared” ( p. 48). The dilemma becomes how to equip the GED program instructors who lack the specialized skill set to teach the neediest learners.

### ***Content and Program Barriers***

Failure for programs to meet the personal learning needs of its learners is an institutional barrier for GED students (May-Varas, 2015; Rice, 2019). Institutional barriers include practices, policies, or procedures within the educational system which create difficulty or challenge for adult learners (Goodwin, 2002; Quigley et al., 2011). This may include ineffective structures, staffing, scheduling, cost, attendance



requirements, teaching methods, or any other systemic barrier that would limit access or opportunities for success for GED students (Goodwin, 2002; May-Varas, 2015; Quigley et al., 2011; Rice, 2019). Unlike the situational barriers which may lie out of the control of GED program staff, institutional barriers are the ones in which the organization should work directly to eliminate.

One of the common barriers GED programs currently face is program quality to adequately prepare learners for the updated GED test. With limited funding for programs and new legislation in some states requiring testing programs to be free of charge, already low-funded programs must find additional money to provide services (Savaiano & Goddard, 2018). Without the money, resources, or staff to effectively run the programs, many adult education programs are relegated to running inefficient programs. This compromises the number of classes that may be offered, the quality of instruction, as well as the services available to meet learner needs.

As Tyler & Lofstrom (2010) found “there are structural problems with the GED program that could potentially be addressed by policy and programmatic changes” (p. 823). In addition to the needed changes mentioned, changes to the curriculum of GED programs would increase student success. Many learners in GED preparation programs do not have a clear understanding of what is on the test. A program evaluation conducted by Hutek (2017) found that the curriculum in GED programs should include academic skills practice for varying academic levels as well as clear information about the GED test content, format, and layout. Test sections, time allotments, test center rules, and scoring criteria are also helpful components that are often left unshared with GED program participants.

The changes made to the GED test in the 2014 revision have become an added barrier to testers. The revisions elevated the rigor of the test and made a test that was already challenging for adult learners who struggled to finish high school, even more difficult (Brinkley-Etz Korn & Skolits, 2014). Rather than the basic academic skills it focused on in the past, the test now assesses advanced skills in reading for understanding, higher level math, essay writing, and reasoning using science and social studies concepts. Students not only need to know information and basic skills but also must know how to apply the information to show their depth of knowledge (Hutek, 2017). Its transformation from a competency test to a college and career ready focus has made passing the GED test a greater challenge for testers. GED programs must adjust their approach to ensure the content, instructional practices, and teacher quality in their programs meet this higher level of expectation.

### **Endurance**

The research on adult learners points out that non-cognitive factors greatly impact their success (Salusky et al., 2021). Motivation and persistence, particularly, arose as non-cognitive themes in the literature pertaining to academically marginal, adult students. Many of the studies reviewed called for further study in adult learner success, self-efficacy, motivation, goal attainment, and persistence (Rossi & Bower, 2018). Some researchers categorized motivation and persistence in two different categories, whereas others used the terms synonymously or used one term to help define the other (Anderson, 2017). No matter the context, motivation and persistence emerged as consistent themes affecting adult learner success.

## ***Motivation***

In examining adult learner education and GED completion, motivation emerges as a prominent factor. A deeper understanding of what motivation is and how it affects learning and goal attainment is salient to the topic. Researchers often define motivation in terms of why one does what one does (Weiner, 1989) based on the value placed on the outcome (Suri et al., 2018). The source of motivation can either stem from a belief or desire (Pearson, 2015). In simple terms, motivation can be defined as the desire one has to obtain a goal. Singh (2011) defines motivation and motivation theory as “an internal drive that activates behavior and gives it direction. The term motivation theory is concerned with the processes that describe why and how human behavior is activated and directed.” Motivation is typically referred to as either intrinsic or extrinsic with intrinsic motivation being driven by internal forces such as pleasure or a sense of accomplishment and external motivation being driven by external forces such as rewards or other outside drivers.

The research on motivation is expansive and falls into many categories of study. Weiner’s (1989) exploration of human motivation, outlines many of the foundational researchers and theories in the study of motivation, including Need reduction theories such as Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of motivation and Hull’s drive theory; Expectancy-value theories such as Lewin’s field theory, Atkinson’s theory of achievement motivation, and Rotter’s theory of social learning; Attribution theory as explained by Heider, Kelley, and Weiner; and Humanistic psychology as theorized by Maslow, Rogers, and Allport. More recent perspectives on motivation include Dweck’s viewpoint on how mindset affects motivation as well as Bandura’s theory on self-

efficacy's role in human motivation (Dienstbier, 1991). In examining the similarities and differences of each theory, it is evident that one is not truer than the other but rather each is relevant in examining phenomena in different contexts.

In considering motivation in the context of adult learners, it is particularly important to note that a learner may be motivated to complete a task or goal but may not have the resources, skill, or follow through to see it to completion (Holmquist, 2013). Adult learners must see the value in motivation. The three types of value in motivation are *utility*, which is defined as usefulness; *importance*, described as significance or value; and *cost*, which is characterized as the work being worth the investment (Shaw et al., 2015). The motive for starting the steps toward a goal can be categorized as either need-based or interest-based. Need-based motives in an adult learning context are those related to academics, the course, or professional goals. Interest-based motives, conversely, focus on personal, social, or even topical motives (Badali et al., 2022). Examining the type of motive gives additional insight into learner motivation.

### ***Student Learning Motivation***

Learner success can also be specifically tied to how a learner is motivated to learn (Westover et al., 2021). Whether the theory utilized is rooted in behavioral, cognitive, or constructivist theory, student learning motivation is grounded in learning theory. Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (2017) outlined a contemporary framework for student learner motivation. The model includes the elements the researchers found to be critical to high learner motivation. Programs which included cultural responsiveness of the instructor, student diversity, shared responsibility for learning, the instructor's role in motivating

students, and the pillars of student learning motivation were found to have greater success rates than those without these components.

Another factor considered in motivation is the level of achievement motivation. Achievement motivation is based on a learner's pursuit of meaningful goals and the intense desire for personal achievement (Singh, 2011). Those with high levels of achievement motivation are internally motivated to achieve at high levels for the personal fulfillment they receive from accomplishing a goal or task. Atkinson's theory of achievement motivation associates motives with the emotions of pride and shame. "Achievement behavior is viewed as the resultant of an emotional conflict between hopes for success and fears of failure" (Weiner, 1989, p. 191).

In terms of GED students, motivation is a factor that learners characterize as key to success or failure (Shaw et al., 2015). Many adult learners have the desire to begin the GED program and balance their hope for success with the fear of failure from past school experiences that may have led to their unsuccessful completion of high school. When the hope for success outweighs the fear of failure, adult education students use this hope, along with other motivating factors, to proceed with their GED journey (Salusky et al., 2021). Some of the motivating factors found by Bowen & Nantz (2014) that propel students forward in their progress include the benefits of having a GED, such as access to post-secondary education, higher earning potential, the ability to be a role model for their children, and the empowerment and erasure of shame found in completing their high school equivalency degree.

Some of the factors that deter students from seeking their GED credential are limiting beliefs about their success, competing priorities, and negative school

experiences. These fears and deterrents “can manifest as withdrawal or rejection” (Rose, 2012) as well as avoidance and procrastination. The lack of execution can easily be misinterpreted as apathy or disinterest and the learner deemed unmotivated. Often, their behavior has less to do with the desire to achieve the goal and more to do with the thought that they will be unable to accomplish it.

### ***Persistence***

Motivation to return to school is the first step in pursuit of a GED; however, persistence is the determinant of whether one will follow through to completion. Adult learners who have the persistence to complete programs do, while others without it do not (Comings et al., 1999). Persistence is the ability to persevere through the obstacles that may arise (Anderson, 2017) and pose a challenge to completion of a goal.

Despite their motivation to enroll, persistence remains the main deterrent to progress. Seldom are students incapable of progress, even substantial progress; however, many did not stay in the program long enough to make the progress of which they were capable. They had goals to read better, to take a GED test, or enter college but they did not consistently work toward the goal (Holmquist, 2013, p.60).

Without the persistence to push forward through barriers that arise for adult learners, the motivation to obtain their GED will be outweighed by their inability to progress through the challenges.

In terms of academic achievement, persistence is one of the non-cognitive skills, such as decision-making, planning, self-control, and perseverance that Salusky et al. (2021) found to be critical to academic goal attainment. The average GED student often

has similar cognitive and academic abilities as their at-risk peers who receive a high school diploma. The non-cognitive traits, such as persistence; however, are lower in the population of GED program participants (Rossi & Bower, 2018; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2010). An understanding of how non-cognitive factors affect adult learner success is important in demystifying the GED completion dilemma.

A study by Holmquist (2013) discusses the effect of emotional, psychological, and non-cognitive factors on academic pursuits. In examining the relationship between motivation, persistence, and efficacy, it was found that general efficacy greatly affected academic self-efficacy. Efficacy is defined as the learner's confidence in their ability. This general confidence in ability directly affects perception of academic ability. As found in Atkinson's theory of achievement motivation, those who felt they would not experience success often developed an ambivalence toward academic pursuits, rather than the increased fortitude displayed by those who demonstrated higher levels of self-efficacy and believed in their ability to achieve the goal.

For adult students with a history of academic failure, this could mean that belief in successfully completing academic tasks was diminished. They might not believe themselves to be capable of success. Self-efficacy was based on an individual's beliefs about their capabilities to achieve certain outcomes such as program completion (p. 57).

In the Holmquist (2013) study, motivation and persistence were defined as separate concepts in which motivation focused on desire and persistence focused on following through to goal attainment. Rather than focusing solely on the basic environmental barriers often cited in GED learner retention research, the study also

identified the barriers to persistence that affect GED participants' successful completion. Many students leave the program based on the negative belief that they will not succeed but also the negative perceptions they have of themselves and that they perceive society to have of them based on their “dropout” status.

Salusky et al. (2021) further examined the idea of stigma conscious as a barrier to adult learner persistence. Many learners in the GED pathway recognize the benefit of furthering their education but also carry the stigma of leaving the traditional education system. Even the act of enrolling in an adult education program identifies the student as a high school “dropout.” The term dropout itself is problematic, as the connotation implies a critical view of those who choose an alternative learning pathway (Schwartz, 2013). The threat of being stereotyped as less intelligent or academically incompetent may also serve as a hindrance to GED students. Learners holding the shame of stigma consciousness and the weight of stereotype threat experience an added stress that can pose a barrier to GED completion.

One of the ways in which adult learners in GED programs may overcome the barriers to persistence is by reframing their thinking surrounding adult education. Mitchell (2015) explained the positive shift in program participant’s thinking using transformative learning theory. These observations noted when learners focused their attention on the positive aspects and outcomes of GED programming and completion of the GED test, their overall perception changed.

Participants transformed their perception of the value of the GED from fear and shame to feelings of pride when they realized that the GED program provided



them with a way to get back on track with their education and helped them reach their individual goals (p. 168).

This transformative thinking changed their perceptions of the program from an obligation to a privilege and from belittling to uplifting. The participants in the study expressed this positive mindset change in how they described the program in terms of its attributes, including autonomy, individualization, time, and focus on the needs of the adult learner. The positive outcomes they celebrated about their self-formation during program participation included acquiring new skills, learning new perspectives, reaching educational goals, and a renewed sense of confidence in their ability (Mitchell, 2015).

### **Best Practices**

The term best practice is widely used in the field of education. A best educational practice can be considered anything from a general trend in education to a research-based strategy. The Educational Opportunity Association (EOA) manages a best practices clearinghouse which defines best education practices “as the wide range of individual activities, policies, and programmatic approaches to achieve positive changes in student attitudes or academic behaviors.” The EOA determines the level to categorize each practice by the evidence of its effectiveness. Each practice is deemed either promising (promising practice with data collection in progress), validated (practice with positive research outcomes in one setting), or exemplary (practice with positive outcomes replicated in multiple education settings). Whether the best practices are education activities or programs, the focus is on what works well in education.

The following exemplar was chosen to highlight elements of a best practice GED program. This program utilized a combination of best practice strategies to mitigate

barriers for its participants and experienced promising results during the research study. In addition to the focused instructional program and quality teaching staff, the program also focused on the themes later identified in the literature review as best practices in GED programming. This program provided a real-world example of GED best practices in action, including a relationship-centered approach, holistic programming with a focus on persistence, and transition services through the community college pathway.

### ***Exemplar***

One GED program that gained attention as a best practice program, as studied by Kefallinou (2009), is the program at Quinsigamond Community College's Adult Community Learning Center. The Community Learning Center serves approximately 400 adult learners per year and was grant-funded through the learner persistence project to address the low retention rate in the ABE & GED programs. The project focused in on the GED program and began with each GED student participating in a student persistence orientation. The orientation emphasized the importance of goal setting, persisting through challenges, realistic expectations, and strategies to overcome barriers. Students were introduced to the concept of "stopping out" versus "dropping out" of the program during orientation. Stopping out is one of the distinguishing features of the program, as it allows students to create a plan to take time away from the program--whether with home study, distance learning, or a leave of absence—with a structured plan for re-entry.

Other supports were added to traditional programming to complement the persistence focus. For example, all students in the GED classes were monitored and when attendance showed two consecutive absences, the team convened with the teacher and the student to create a plan. Counselors visited classes and met with individual

students to focus on barriers and collaborative solutions to prevent stopping out. If stopping out was deemed necessary, a study plan and/or a re-entry plan was developed. Program staff identified the intentional planning for the interruptions that adult learners face in their education as a key factor in the program's improvement:

We experienced a considerable change in staff and program attitudes toward students who had to stop out. Although we never intended to make it difficult for students to come back to our program after they had to stop out, we unintentionally did not make it easy either. We lacked a plan that would support them and bring them back (p. 108).

In addition to the knowledge that they could return to the program if life circumstances required them to take a break, students also identified self-monitoring progress and strong relationships as motivators to continuing the program. Program staff created skill checklists for students to monitor mastery of skills and embedded opportunities for students to check-in on one another and be checked on by program staff. Implementing the strategies outlined in the persistence project improved program completion rates by over twenty percent in its first year of implementation.

### ***Key Components***

The research literature highlights best practices used in successful GED programs. Many of the key components include strategies to address high attrition rates. The first three weeks have been deemed a critical time in GED programs, as it is the timeframe in which many GED participants disengage and subsequently drop out (Appleby, 2004; Quigley, 1998; Ziegler et al., 2004). To assist learners through this time and beyond, some of the best practices incorporated include crafting a focused support plan for each

learner, an additional plan of support for learners to ‘stop out’ if needed, a system for managed enrollment to allow for coming into the program at different times, a formal re-entry process, and a focus on persistence (Kefallinou, 2009).

Effective programs also prioritize academic preparation and instruction in GED classrooms. Best practices include a comprehensive instructional plan that not only considers learner needs and ability levels but also utilizes sound teaching practices. The Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) is the placement test utilized in most programs to assist program staff in matching participants to the most appropriate interventions (Liu, 2020). Academic content is often covered using GED test preparation materials and practice tests are utilized to assess test readiness as well as teach test content, layout, format, administration, and scoring (Bowen & Nantz, 2014; Hutek, 2017). Hutek (2017) identifies seven important focus areas for the GED classroom, including 1) test readiness, 2) resources aligned to the test, 3) multi-level classrooms, 4) computer/internet access, 5) understanding of testing requirements, 6) tracking unsuccessful testers, and 7) administrative support. These elements coupled with how the learning connects with students’ lives increases their potential to reach program outcomes.

In addition to the focus on retention and high-quality academic preparation, three major themes arose in the literature regarding successful GED preparation programs. Best practice programs emphasize the importance of one or a combination of relationship-centered programming, bridges to future opportunities, and/or a holistic approach that incorporates wrap-around services and non-cognitive skill development.

**Relationships.** For adult learners to have success in adult secondary education programs, they need supportive relationship structures. Dowdy (2001) noted that

students with solid social support systems experienced higher GED completion than their counterparts without the same level of support. Without the support to manage the obligations of work, school, and home, the completion of the high school equivalency degree is unlikely. Bowen & Nantz (2014) conducted a case study of a GED program to determine the elements needed to mitigate barriers for adult learners. The findings revealed that varied structures for learner support, which could include family, community, peer, and program support, assisted in barrier removal. They noted the importance of a sponsor to encourage the learner as well as opportunities for the learner to mentor others. A social network of support as well as program advisement creates a strong system to allow the participant the opportunity to focus on learning.

This network of support is important for learners to succeed in adult learner programs. Salusky et al., (2021) found that social support correlated with a positive attitude about learning opportunities and countered the internalized stigma some learners felt for pursuing an alternate pathway to the high school diploma. When learners have the support of a peer group, they are more likely to actively engage in adult learning programs and cultivate the focus necessary to persist through to completion (Goto & Martin, 2009; Holmquist, 2013). When a learner is the only person in their social circle pursuing educational pursuits, the feeling of isolation can become demotivating (Rossi & Bowen, 2018). The social capital of working through the program with a known or established peer group can serve as a motivator to attend class and as an incentive to work together to overcome barriers to progress.

The student-teacher relationship is an important element to consider in GED programming (Shaw et al., 2015; Zacharakis et al., 2011). “Even though adult learners

may enter the program with a short term goal of passing the GED test, it is the responsibility of the teacher to help learners expand those goals into long term goals that promote autonomous, responsible thinkers” (Hairston, 2013, p. 27). Connecting to programs through these relationships helps participants see value in the program and eases their transition into adult learning (Salinas & Llanes, 2003). Learner perceptions of instructor connectedness or instructor anxiety has an impact on individual success (Hairston, 2013), with supportive relationships positively impacting GED completion (Anderson, 2017; Appleby, 2004; Goto & Martin, 2009; Kelfallinou, 2009). The positive attachment bonds created between student and instructor have the potential to repair the insecure attachments learners may have had with teachers in past school experiences. Restoring those bonds through nurturing student-teacher relationships has the potential to positively impact the motivation, engagement, and belonging needed for academic achievement (Kennedy, 2008).

The relationship with GED program staff is also significant in adult learner progress. Positions such as success navigator, sponsor, mentor, advisor, and tutor have similar potential to the instructor role to assist a participant in feeling connectedness to the program. In fact, Gopalakrishnan (2008) found that GED students who were mentored were three times as likely to persist in their adult education programs than their peers who did not receive this additional support. Program staff work with learners to set goals, craft success plans, provide counsel and advisement, and encourage participants with GED success stories (Anderson, 2017). Their impact intensifies when they collaborate with community partners such as successful GED completers as well as school districts, post-secondary schools, and employers. Relationships forged during the

program also assist staff in having the rapport needed to reach out to students if they show signs of disengagement (Hutek, 2017) or when their progress stalls in the process.

**Bridge to Next Path.** Success has also been found in GED Bridge programs, which seek to bridge the gap between adult basic level skill proficiency and employment or higher education. These programs serve adults seeking high school equivalency certificates who also desire to transition into postsecondary education, career training, or career advancement opportunities. Martin & Broadus (2013) describe GED Bridge programs as “a promising new approach to GED instruction, as it aims to better prepare students not only to pass the GED exam, but also to continue on to college and training programs” (p.1). Bridge programs specialize in providing a career focus and center around the elements of 1) contextualized, career-focused GED curriculum 2) college and career transition services 3) direct connection to a postsecondary institution, and 4) structured enrollment.

In a study led by Treskon et al. (2020) at Northeast Wisconsin Technical College comparing a traditional GED preparation program to a GED Bridge program using a random assignment research design, researchers found ‘distinct differences’ in instructional practices and engagement between the programs. The Bridge program offered closed enrollment which allowed learners to move through the curriculum in a cohort and for instructors to focus instruction. Students viewed the career-focused curriculum as a means of teaching the subjects tested on the GED as beneficial to their progress and their connection to the postsecondary institution through the transition specialist helped them stay focused on the goal of education beyond the program. In comparing outcomes, 33% of students who participated in the Bridge program earned

their GED, while only 14% of students in the traditional GED preparation program earned this credential.

A study of a GED Bridge program at LaGuardia Community College in New York found that “one year after enrolling in the program, Bridge students were far more likely to have completed the course, passed the GED exam, and enrolled in college than students in a more traditional GED preparation course” (Martin & Broadus, 2013, p. 2). This program focused on the GED learners’ pathways into the health and business fields and utilized content specific, career-related curriculum to engage learner interest, build the skills tested on the GED test, and develop the academic skills and identity needed to succeed in future pathway opportunities.

When compared with the control group randomly assigned to the GED prep program, Martin & Broadus (2013) found the GED Bridge students were 20% more likely to complete their preparation course, twice as likely to pass the GED exam, and three times as likely to enroll in college as those in the traditional GED program. Findings from the study attributed success to the critical thinking embedded through the text and activities related to the everyday realities of professionals in the field in comparison to the traditional program which taught skills in isolation. The highly qualified, full-time program staff and instructors were also credited for providing focused personal attention through additional in-class hours as well as transition advisement, goal setting, visits from the field, and other opportunities for high levels of connection and engagement.

The state of Oregon has also experimented with Career Pathway programs as a means of assisting adult learners in completing programs to reach longer term goals.



They found success in designing programs with contextualized curriculum and post-secondary school and employer engagement. These GED preparation programs are located at community college sites, and the Oregon Pathways to Adult Basic Skills curriculum is utilized to teach reading, writing, math, and college and career readiness skills in the context of specific career pathways (Mageehon, 2013). The structure allows students to move through the program with the support of a cohort group as well as other motivators. The program site at Umpqua Community College (UCC), for example, motivates learners to persist through their GED program by offering a college tuition waiver. After completing 60 hours of GED preparation instruction, students may begin accumulating up to 16 credit hours of college credit while still in the GED program. After perfecting this model, UCC's Bridge program moved from 4% of their GED completers continuing to college to 80% of their program participants successfully transitioning from the GED to the college aspect of the program.

Bridge programs are also utilized outside of the community college setting. An example of an innovative GED program utilizing the Bridge model is the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe program (the capitalized letters in ChalleNGe stand for National Guard). This program provides a bridge to military service and other post-secondary opportunities by assisting young adults in completing their GED (Bloom et al., 2009). This program includes a residential component, 'military-style' rigor, youth development, and a post residential mentoring program. The Bridge pathway includes transition services in which the youth receive placement in either employment, education, or military service after program completion. In a study using random assignment to compare youth in 10 ChalleNGe programs to youth in control groups, the program group was approximately 36% more likely to have obtained their high school equivalency diploma (Bloom et al., 2009). Researchers

found in their follow up studies that positive results, such as higher employment rates and earnings, of the program participants held over time (Millenky et al., 2012).

Whether the pathway to GED completion leads to opportunities in higher education or is tied to employment or apprenticeship opportunities (Liu, 2021), Bridge programs provide motivation for adult learners to complete the GED as a means of advancing toward their next opportunity. Some employers tie career advancement such as promotions, title, and pay range to GED completion, just as some social service agencies offer financial incentive (Ziegler et al., 2004), program graduation, or career placement to participants for preparing for and completing the GED exam. Both employers and local agencies often partner with neighboring GED preparation programs to assist their employees and clients through GED preparation and testing.

The research literature on Bridge programs highlights that these programs yield results not based on a particular pathway focus, but because they emphasize the needs of the adult learner. These needs include the GED learners' desire for relevance, interest, engagement, transition services, and intentional support to persist to completion. As Rittberger & Monczunski (2020) point out, career pathways also assist learners in moving beyond the traumas that may have held them back by helping them chart new education, career, and life pathways. Ultimately, Bridge programs provide the structure, instructional focus, advisement, and relevance to participants' post-GED interests to assist GED students in completing their programs and successfully passing the GED exam.

**Holistic Approach.** The multi-faceted needs of the adult learner necessitate adult learning programs that cater to those needs. Whereas most remedial programs focus on basic skills, teaching, and barrier removal (Goldrick-Rab, 2010), holistic approaches recognize the need to infuse non-cognitive skill development into programming

(Holmquist, 2013). The body of educational research on GED programming indicates that the most effective programs integrate academic skills along with barrier consideration and attention to both cognitive and non-cognitive skills (Anderson, 2017; Salusky et al., 2021). These holistic approaches prioritize academics *and* personal needs to support the whole learner.

Where some programs are described as purely “test-driven” (Rose, 2012) and focus strictly on test preparation and independent study, holistic programs have a broader scope, including psychological factors, a continuum of support, and quality instruction (Holmquist, 2013). Bowen & Nantz (2014) tout holistic approaches which engage the learner, family, and community, while incorporating academic, vocational, life, and non-cognitive skills. For example, Nix & Michalak (2012) outline a holistic approach for GED learners which includes classroom instruction, career/personal counseling, learner action planning, mentorship, and academic tutoring.

The 2014 revision of the GED exam amplified the need for additional supports in GED preparation (Brinkley-Etz Korn & Skolits, 2014). Prior to the increased requirements for rigor, adult learners already had high attrition in programs and low passing rates on the GED exam. These changes to the test, although important to capture college and career readiness consistent with the standards of the high school diploma, posed an increased challenge to the pool of GED pursuers who already struggled to attain the high school equivalency degree.

When we make programs more demanding, we also have to assure that we have other programs in place to address the needs of those who risk getting left behind. Otherwise, we will continue to help the relatively better off at the expense of the

truly vulnerable, keeping in place a sizable educational underclass (Rose, 2012, p. 47).

Holistic GED programs are an answer to the call of programming to address both the increased academic rigor of the revised GED requirements, while also supporting adult learners to overcome the situational and dispositional barriers associated with attrition.

In response to the challenges posed by the GED test revisions, Anderson (2017) outlined the multiple layers of support needed in a holistic GED program. The key components of the structure included 1) preparation programming, 2) quality tiered academic instruction, 3) faculty training, 4) skills training, and 5) barrier support. Preparation programming is offered to GED students prior to starting the GED program and may include academic and non-academic evaluation, skills training, and external support. Quality tiered academic instruction includes quality classroom instruction, supplemental instruction, and intensive intervention. This may include the GED preparation curriculum, developmental classes, tutorial program, and interventions for specific learners. Faculty training was deemed imperative to not only delivery of quality instruction but also for collaboration and information sharing. Skills training serves the purpose of strengthening a wide range of skills from computer training to study skills to learner motivation, whereas barrier support includes services to mitigate learner overwhelm such as counseling, childcare, and other support services.

Some programs offer direct support services within their program structure, while other programs provide referrals to external supports and resources to address participant needs (Anderson, 2017). Holistic GED preparation programs which attempt to mitigate barriers within their own service offerings often have additional support staff to provide

these services. Case management is a part of many programs that seek to create a personal plan with adult learners to mitigate barriers to persistence (Holmquist, 2013). Whether a counselor, success navigator, mentor, sponsor, or advisor, these additional program staff are an integral part of adult learner access to information and support necessary for program success (Rittberger & Monczunski, 2020). Their efforts, in concert with those of the instructors, offer adult ‘second chance’ learners the wrap-around services to reduce hardship (Rose, 2012) and allow them to focus on their academic endeavors.

## **Chapter 3: Evaluation**

### **Introduction**

This chapter details the methodology utilized in this evaluation of a local adult GED program (see Appendix A) as well as the design of the study. It begins with the evaluator's positionality statement to frame the evaluation and identify ways the evaluator's position influences the research (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). A definition of program evaluation is provided and a rationale given regarding evaluation design choices. The purpose of the evaluation, evaluation questions, data to be analyzed, data collection methods, and the data analysis plan is also outlined in the chapter.

### **Positionality Statement**

Positionality is a researcher's position in a study and how they, as the researcher, influence the research process, while reflexivity is the process of developing one's positionality (Holmes, 2020; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The evaluator of this study acknowledges the importance of "locating" herself within the evaluation process and disclosing where and how her personal stance may "show up" in the research process (Holmes, 2020).

The evaluator believes that research is a social process in which the researcher and participants work in concert to construct knowledge. She also believes that the researcher is a key instrument in the research process (Creswell, 2014) and views the research through a social constructionist lens. The evaluator's preference for collaborative and appreciative inquiry emphasizes the value she places on joint participation and a positive stance in the research process. Participatory, appreciative, and utilization-based approaches appeal to the evaluator's belief that findings are

generated through interaction and can be positively integrated into practice when decision-makers are involved in the research process.

As a current doctoral student with a professional background in teaching and school administration, the evaluator brings a strong belief that with the proper support all learners can learn, and educators greatly impact student outcomes. As the granddaughter of a grandmother who worked to earn her GED credential (See Grandma's story in Appendix B), the evaluator also believes that the GED test is an effective measure for high school equivalency. Additionally, the evaluator's own adult education journey involved both barriers to completion and time away and required a recommitment to school and schoolwork to complete the degree program.

In these ways, the research focus of evaluating a GED program in the context of assisting the program leadership in program improvement, was of personal and educational interest to the evaluator. The evaluator may be seen as both an insider and/or outsider to study participants based on differing aspects of the evaluator's identity. For example, the evaluator may be seen as an outsider to program staff based on her status as an adult learner and affiliation outside of the GED program. They may also view her as an insider based on her professional roles of educator and administrator. The evaluator's insider role with the GED program's base team developed over time as they worked collaboratively on the evaluation.

The evaluator's role of outsider was established intentionally with program participants. The evaluator was explicitly labeled as an external evaluator in all communication to program participants to ensure interviewees understood interviews would be conducted by an individual outside of the organization. Assigning the GED

program director as the “insider advocate” was strategically arranged to provide an insider invitation to participate in the study. Although the evaluator was established as an outsider and has not had a personal experience as a GED student, the program participants may have viewed her as an insider after learning she is also an adult learner seeking an education credential.

The stance and research lens of the evaluator influenced the research design, approach, data collection, interpretation, and recommendations. The researcher chose a qualitative, case study design to gather information about the learner experiences in the program by talking directly to the participants, face-to-face in their natural setting. A participatory, utilization approach to evaluation was utilized because of the evaluator’s value of collaboration and the belief that educators can directly impact the education of students through direct support. The evaluator interpreted the evaluation findings and generated themes and recommendations based on the belief that adult learners can learn when given the necessary support to do so.

Although the evaluator’s views influenced the research, every attempt was made to acknowledge how personal stance and preconceptions may have impacted the research. By taking a reflexive approach, the evaluator endeavored to ensure personal stance did not limit her ability to consider important alternatives (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). In this way, the evaluator limited the chance of bias “while recognizing that this aspiration can never be fully attained—all research will be influenced by the researcher and there is no completely ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’ knowledge” (Ormston et al., 2014, as cited in Holmes, 2020, p. 4).



## **Program Evaluation Overview**

Program evaluation is defined as a process “to make decisions about a program’s need, value, worth, or fidelity” (Bakken, 2018, p. 1) as well as determine whether the design and delivery of a program were effective and whether the proposed outcomes were met” (Caffarella, 2013). A qualitative program evaluation was selected as the research approach for this study to meet the objectives of the original request by the local GED program leadership for the evaluation of the local GED program. The program evaluation’s focus is on the program’s effect on the experience of program participants.

The commissioned inquiry which led to the program evaluation sought to gain an outside, research-focused perspective on the GED program delivery to understand why the program is having difficulty meeting the program outcomes of student retention and GED test completion. Since program evaluation is often used to collect information and learn about a program to inform decision-making and assist with program improvement (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013; Ryan & Cousins, 2009; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013), this approach was selected by the researcher to respond to the stakeholder request.

To determine which approach to program evaluation to utilize, as described by Owen (2007), the orientation, typical issues, the program component focus, and state of the program were examined. Using these criteria, an Interactive (participatory) approach to evaluation was chosen based on its characteristics matching the state of the program as well as the purpose for the evaluation (See Table 3). Table 3 details how the local GED program and the stated evaluation needs fit within the dimensions of the participatory approach of program evaluation.

**Table 3***Dimensions of the Interactive/Participatory Evaluation Approach*

	Interactive/Participatory
Orientation (Purpose)	Improvement
Typical Issues (Questions)	How is the program going? Is the delivery working? Is delivery consistent with the program plan? How could delivery be changed to make it more effective? How could this organization change to make it more effective?
Major Program Component Focus	Program Implementation
State of Program Implementation	On-going

\*Adapted from Owen, 2007

A participatory process in evaluation is focused on collaboration between the evaluator and participants (Savin-Baden & Major, 2009). Participatory program evaluation was chosen for this evaluation as a means of centering the evaluation on the requester's inquiry, stakeholder needs, and participant involvement. Participatory approaches focus on the formative process, what can be done to refine a program as it develops (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013), and engages the stakeholders through active participation and learning (Bakken, 2018). A practical approach to participatory evaluation focuses on the utilization of the information. Patton (1997) outlines the utilization-focused approach as a means of working alongside the participants who will use the information. The premise is to involve decision-makers and users along the way to increase the likelihood that results will be utilized. Overall, this program evaluation uses collaborative inquiry to gain understanding about the GED preparation program.

The findings will be used to make programmatic improvements as well as provide foundational understandings that may be applied to improve other GED programs.

### **Evaluation Questions**

After a review of the related research on GED preparation programs and conversations with the leadership team of the local GED program, evaluation questions were developed by the evaluator to anchor the evaluation. The purpose of the study was identified as an in-depth analysis of the program and how it is experienced by the adult learners as a means of using the findings to improve program success rates and offer insights to similar programs.

This study explores three main evaluation questions:

1. Who has been served in the local adult GED program?
2. How do adult learners describe their experience in the local adult GED program?
3. How do current processes connect with program outcomes?

### **Evaluation Design**

The evaluation design used in this qualitative study is a single case study design. Case study research design was chosen as the preferred method because it involves in-depth analysis of a particular case (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2018). The case to be examined in this program evaluation is a single, local GED preparation program (see Appendix A). The case study design supports the goals of the program evaluation, which seek to explore the program, its learners, their experiences, and program processes to address program attrition and GED test completion rates (Caffarella et al., 2013).

To conduct the evaluation of the local GED preparation program, information was gathered from multiple sources. The data requested included program records, such as

attendance and enrollment data as well as program documents, such as the adult learner's individualized education plans and the program's logic model. In addition to the documents and records review, individual perceptions of program participants and team members were obtained to gain the stakeholder perspective. These perceptions were captured using semi-structured interviews of both past and present program participants as well as program staff. Multiple data points served to provide a comprehensive view of the program.

The specific methods chosen for the evaluation were based on which data would best answer the original evaluation questions. To find out more information about the adult learners served in the program, a records review of attendance rosters, logic model outputs, and enrollment data were planned. A review of program documents was also planned to give insight into how learning plans connect with program outcomes. Semi-structured interviews were selected to provide participant perspectives about their experiences in the program and insight into program processes.

Field notes were utilized throughout the evaluation process as a means of capturing the evaluator's thoughts, insights, and questions. The notes served as a tool to notate new ideas as well as recurring patterns between evaluation activities. In addition to using field notes to record memos from documents and interviews, they were also used to record meeting notes and summarize interactions between the evaluator and program staff during scheduled planning meetings.

## **Evaluation Data & Analysis**

### ***Document Review***

As Yin (2018) points out “systematic searches for relevant documents are important in any data collection plan” (p. 115). Document review became a telling part of the data collection plan for this program evaluation. The review of documents from the local GED program provided context and insight into the program’s current and historical functioning. The evidence collected by the evaluator helped gain descriptive information to assist in answering the evaluation questions. The documents were useful in establishing who has been served in the program, program functioning, as well as historical information pertinent to current processes.

The documents targeted for review included those requested by the evaluator as well as those suggested by GED program stakeholders. The plan for document collection included collecting documents based on their relevance to answering the evaluation questions. Their quality was assessed using Scott’s (2014) criteria for assessing document quality: authenticity, credibility, representation, and meaning. Documents requested included both practical documents and files (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013) such as program literature, reports, administrative documents, logic models, and previous program evaluations. Other documents requested included any records such as, attendance rosters, enrollment records, staffing records, assessment data, student learning plans, and academic records. Document review was chosen to give background information, context, and allow the evaluator to note consistencies and inconsistencies in program implementation.

After the collection of documents was provided by the program team, the evaluator stored them in a qualitative text database (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The documents were reviewed by the evaluator in the following manner. First, documents were sorted by program type to eliminate documents that were specific to the English as a Second Language (ESL) or Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs also offered by the organization. Once the documents were sorted the ones pertaining directly to the GED program made up the data set and were further sorted based on their relevance to the evaluation questions and topics of interest from the GED literature review. Field notes were written regarding selection decisions and document content memos for later review. After interviews were completed, the documents and field notes were reviewed to assist in creating the code system which contributed to theme development.

### ***Semi-Structured Interviews***

**Program Participants.** Semi-structured interviews of the GED program participants were conducted to learn more about them, program processes, and their overall experience in the program. The participants were selected using purposeful sampling to intentionally select learners (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) who are currently enrolled as well as those who have graduated or discontinued participation in the program. One of the program staff was utilized as an “insider advocate” to make the initial contact with GED program participants.

The evaluator created a sample email for the “insider advocate” to send to the full database of current and former GED participants to invite them to participate in the interview process of the program evaluation. The email contained a link to an electronic copy of the active consent for participation (see Appendix C) as well as the participant’s

preferred contact method to schedule the interview. The evaluator then contacted each interested participant using either email or a Google Voice phone number to schedule the interview as well as determine the student's preferred interview method: in-person, phone, or Zoom video conferencing.

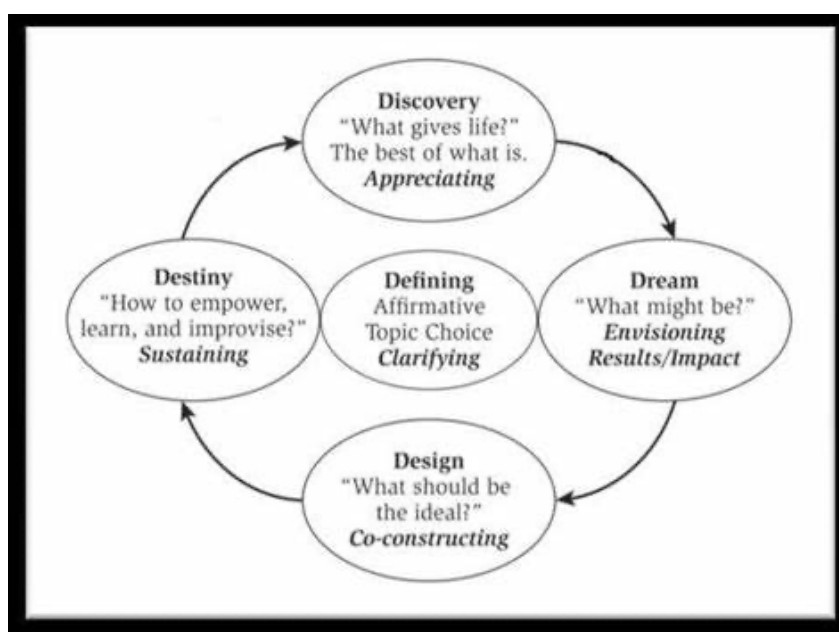
The evaluator chose a semi-structured interview format to allow participants flexibility in their answers as well as the opportunity for additional themes to develop. During the interviews, the evaluator listened for program and system examples of barriers and supports for GED persistence and test completion and recorded insights as part of the field notes. The interviews were audio recorded using a secure Zoom video conferencing account in an incognito web browser and transcribed using the dictation software in Microsoft Word. The raw transcription was then finalized by the evaluator. This process included listening to the Zoom recording of the interview to structure and revise the transcription. Once complete, the final transcription was emailed by the evaluator using a secure, university email account to each participant to provide the opportunity for member checking.

The questions selected for the semi-structured interview of program participants (Appendix D) were chosen to help answer the original evaluation questions. Question one was chosen to gain insight into the participants' motivations for pursuing their GED certification. Questions two, four, and five were selected to provide clarification on student perception of successful elements of a program which would prepare them to pass the GED test. Questions three and four were selected to provide the learner the opportunity to share their needs and experiences as a GED student in the local program.

The questions were created using components of Cooperrider's et al. (2001) Appreciative Inquiry model (See Figure 1). Appreciative Inquiry is a strengths-based approach to the improvement process and uses five dimensions: Definition (clarifying), Discovery (appreciating), Dream (envisioning), Design (co-constructing), and Destiny (sustaining).

**Figure 1**

*Cooperrider's Appreciative Inquiry Model*



Cooperrider et al., 2001

From an appreciative lens, questions one and three provide clarification about participants' reasons for pursuing the GED as well as their experiences in the program (Definition). Question four highlights the positive core of the program by determining its helpful aspects (Discovery). Question five provides an opportunity for responders to offer suggestions for program improvement (Dream and Design), while question two offers success requirements needed to sustain the work (Destiny).

1. Why did you decide to pursue your GED?



2. What factors do you think contribute to successful completion of the GED test?
3. How would you describe your overall experience in the GED preparation program?
4. How does the GED preparation program help meet the needs of adult learners?
5. What suggestions do you have for program improvement?

**Program Staff .** All current members of the program staff were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews conducted by the evaluator. The perceptions of the program team were included in data collection to provide additional information about program delivery and processes and to identify important trends about the GED program and its learners. One of the program's leadership team members assisted the evaluator by notifying all team members of the opportunity to participate in the evaluation. This allowed for a purposeful sample of the program staff. The evaluator provided an email message for the program leader to send to the team providing the active consent form and a link for them to opt in to be contacted to schedule an interview. The evaluator followed up with those who opted in to participate. Former program staff, recommended by current team members, were emailed by the evaluator to offer the opportunity to participate in the interview process. Those who expressed interest in participating were emailed an active consent form and contacted by the evaluator to schedule interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the interview format due to the freedom of the open-ended questions. As the program staff answered the questions, they were able to be asked follow-up questions to elaborate on concepts and expand ideas. The questions asked in these interviews were focused on answering the original evaluation questions about the GED learners' experiences and continuous program

improvement. The interviews were conducted via video conference and were audio recorded using Zoom software. The researcher used Microsoft Word's dictation feature to transcribe each conversation during the interview. These transcriptions were later revised to create a final draft to send to participants for member checking.

The questions selected for the semi-structured interview of program staff (Appendix E) were chosen to answer the evaluation questions using the Appreciative Inquiry model (See Figure 1): Definition (clarifying), Discovery (appreciating), Dream (envisioning), Design (Co-constructing), and Destiny (sustaining) (Cooperrider et al., 2001). The questions in the staff interview are based on the 5Ds outlined in the Appreciative Inquiry process. Question one provides clarification about the factors the staff deems necessary to pass the GED test (Definition). Question two appreciates the "positive core" of the program by highlighting its positive features (Discovery). Questions three and four focus on ideas for program improvement (Dream/Design), whereas question five focuses on empowering the staff to continue efforts to meet learner needs by centering their past experiences meeting those needs (Destiny).

1. What factors do you think contribute to successful completion of the GED test?
2. What are the aspects of the GED program that work well?
3. What ideas do you have for helping more learners successfully complete the program?
4. How might the program be changed to make it more effective?
5. What have been your most memorable learning experiences meeting the needs of GED participants in the program?

**Data Analysis Plan.** The chosen method of data analysis for both sets of semi-structured interviews is thematic analysis to analyze and report patterns found in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After the interview process, the data was analyzed utilizing Braun & Clarke's (2006) Phases of thematic analysis (See Table 4): 1) familiarizing yourself with your data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report.

**Table 4**

*Braun & Clarke's (2006) Phases of Thematic Analysis*

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

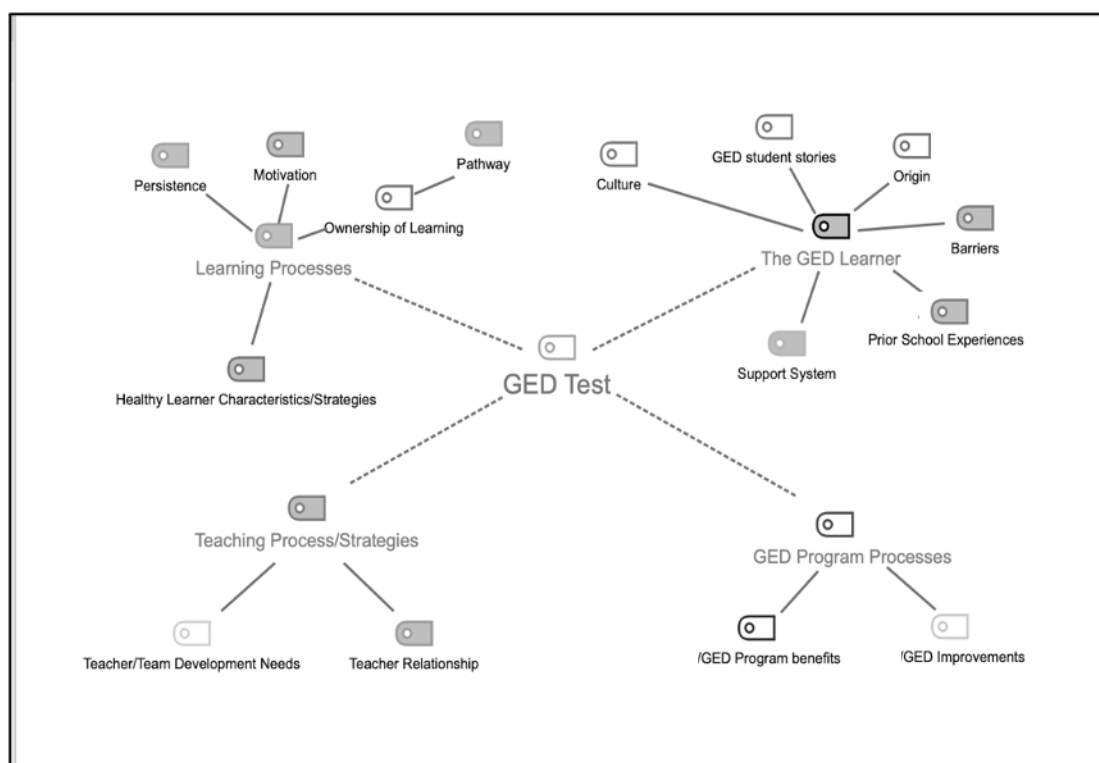
Braun & Clarke, 2006

After the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed for analysis, a preliminary exploratory analysis was conducted by reading the transcription to gain a comprehensive picture of the data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The first cycle of the code system (Miles et al., 2020; Saldaña, 2021) originated from both deductive and inductive coding (Braun & Clark, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Miles et al. (2020) describe the a priori codes generated deductively by the researcher as a "provisional start list of codes prior to field work" (p. 74). The codes generated deductively in this evaluation were developed from the literature review and evaluation questions (represented by the shaded icons in

Figure 2) whereas the inductive codes were generated from insights from the evaluation activities. The code system expanded in its second cycle (Miles et al., 2020; Saldaña, 2021) by adding the trends found in the program's document review, evaluator field notes, and participant interviews. A combination of descriptive and concept coding (Miles et al., 2020; Saldaña, 2021) was utilized to create code labels for each code in the code system.

**Figure 2**

*Conceptual Model of the Code System*

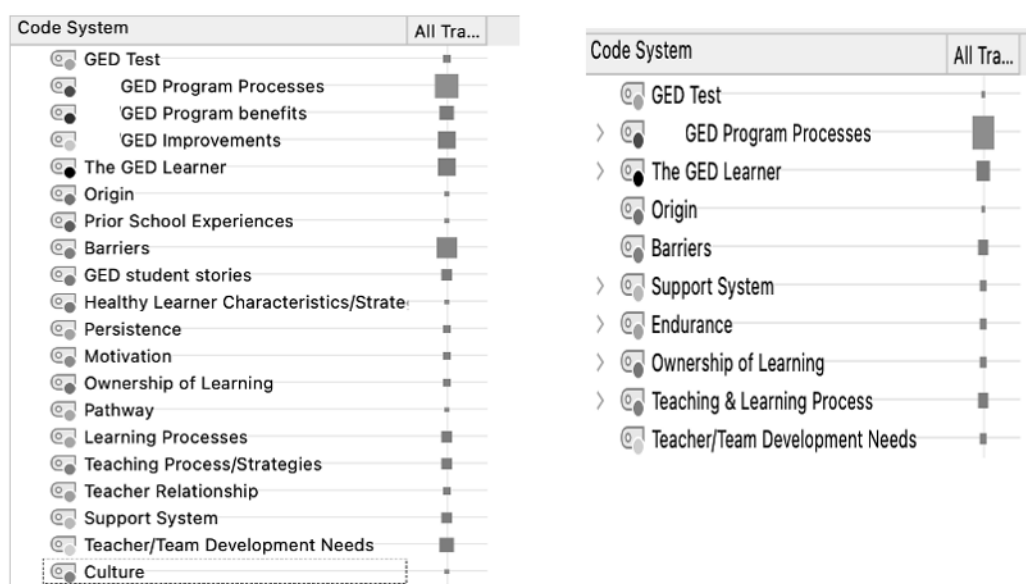


MAXQDA was used as the qualitative data analysis software to store, analyze, and code the transcribed interviews using the code system generated during the evaluation. The text of the interview was imported into the MAXQDA program, and the software was used to mark sections of the text according to the related code label(s) in the

code system. The code system continued to develop in an iterative process of considering the evaluation questions, information from the research literature, and comparison of all three data sources: documents, field notes, and interviews. After the entire data set was marked and coded, text labels were matched. The matching code labels were then combined into broad themes (See Figure 3), connecting back to the evaluation questions, with evidence to support each one (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2021).

**Figure 3**

*Evolution of the Code System*



**Trustworthiness.** To ensure the validity and reliability of the research findings, trustworthiness criteria were established for the analysis using Nowell et al.'s (2017) adaptation of Braun & Clark's (2006) phases of thematic analysis. The criteria include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the data and its analysis (Nowell et al, 2017). Based on these criteria, the evaluator established trustworthiness in

each of the six phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) using Nowell et al.'s trustworthiness framework (2017):

Phase 1: Familiarizing yourself with your data	Triangulated data: documents, field notes, interviews, documented thoughts/potential themes, organized/stored data and notes
Phase 2: Generating initial codes	Journaling, field notes, code system, audit trail of code evolution, meeting notes
Phase 3: Searching for themes	Data triangulation, conceptual model creation, field notes
Phase 4: Reviewing themes	Data triangulation, peer debrief, review of data sources
Phase 5: Defining/naming themes	Data triangulation, peer debrief
Phase 6: Producing the report	Member checking, peer debrief, explanation of code system/analysis, audit trail of code evolution/description

## Summary

The findings presented in the following section provide a more detailed description of context and analytic decisions. The findings will begin with a full description of the GED program based on conversations with program staff, program documents, and interviews. It continues with an exploration of the participatory approach

before explicitly answering each evaluation question. Detailed findings outlined in themes include extract examples and analysis to relate back to the original evaluation questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and provide evidence for the evaluator's reported implications for practice and program recommendations in the final chapter of the report.

## **Chapter 4: Evaluation Findings**

### **Introduction**

This chapter provides the findings gathered from all data sources as they relate to the essence of the evaluation questions 1) who is served in the local GED program, 2) the adult learners' experiences in the program, and 3) an analysis of the GED program's processes related to outcomes. Field notes were utilized in a recursive process to validate and triangulate the data from interactions with program staff, document review, and semi-structured interviews. A detailed description of the GED program, informed by evaluation findings, is provided to add additional context. The participatory approaches utilized are also outlined to highlight the strength of the participatory approach in the evaluation process.

### **Description of Local GED Program**

Through the conversations with the GED program's base team, the document review, and stakeholder interviews, the evaluator was able to obtain a more robust understanding of the local GED program both historically and functionally. In addition to the general information provided in Appendix A describing the program, the evaluator also learned the origin of the organization as well as the evolution of the GED program over time.

The literacy-focused organization, of which the GED program is a part, was started as a derivative of another local literacy organization. The original organization housed an ESL, ABE, and GED program which experienced success; however, a transition in leadership adversely affected the program's funding efforts. Even with high



success rates, the program was closed unexpectedly in April of 2018 due to an inability to fund programming.

Members of the program leadership team, instructors, and tutors immediately began work to establish a new literacy organization based on the foundations of the original organization. In only a few short months, the team founded the new literacy organization, with classes starting in July of 2018. The new organization housed an ESL and ABE program in addition to the local GED program which is the focus of this program evaluation. The local GED program was co-created to include effective components of the original program as well as aspects deemed important by the new team. It offered in-person GED classes at the main campus as well as multiple satellite locations. The base team included the program director, program coordinator, student success navigator, and data specialist.

The program offered GED preparation classes in the areas of Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies to prepare students for the subjects tested on the GED test. The instructional team of GED teachers and volunteer tutors delivered instruction to students seeking their high school equivalency credential. In addition to these core components, the program director's goal was to align the program with the state department of education's requirements for data collection, program hours, and reporting. The intention was to seek accreditation with the state for standards of program quality, accountability, support, resources, and funding.

As the executive director joined the team later that year, program finances became more secure as fundraising and strategic community partnerships were prioritized. Although new leadership decided not to continue seeking state accreditation, the program

continued its processes in alignment with state requirements. The GED program experienced success in student retention and learner progress through the focus on community, strategic partnership, culturally relevant practice, personalized learning, goal setting, and data tracking. Learners' Educational Functioning Levels (EFLs), program hours, and attendance were closely monitored as part of their individualized education plans and student success snapshots. Volunteers and instructors were oriented to the human-centered, learner-focused approach and supported through adult learner training, feedback cycles, and collaboration. The team worked to meet the unique needs of the adult learners they served through structured programming, flexible scheduling, skill development coursework, barrier support, and relationships. The GED program continued to grow as members of the program's leadership and base team changed.

As members of the base team transitioned out, the main office of the organization moved to a local university campus. The new GED program director also joined the team, just as the COVID-19 pandemic ensued. The GED program's team, along with the rest of the organization, pivoted in the face of crisis. They continued the strong relationship-centered approach, offered convenient and flexible programming, and capitalized on the strength of the instructors and the program team. Together, they worked to move programming online, which was previously only offered in an in-person format. This included not only researching and employing an online learning platform and GED curriculum but also ensuring program staff and students were trained on the technology needed to utilize the resources and communicate through web-conferencing.

As a result of lessons learned during the pandemic, the GED program changed its programming to include a permanent on-line option. They currently offer online classes

during the morning and in-person classes in the evening to meet the varied scheduling needs of their students. They also offer in-person, daytime classes at the local correctional and transitional facilities through the contract awarded to the organization by the county corrections department in 2022. The web-based i-Pathways curriculum has been adopted as a learning tool for all online and some in-person students and offers opportunities for them to practice outside of class time. Both students and instructors appreciate the format and content of the curriculum.

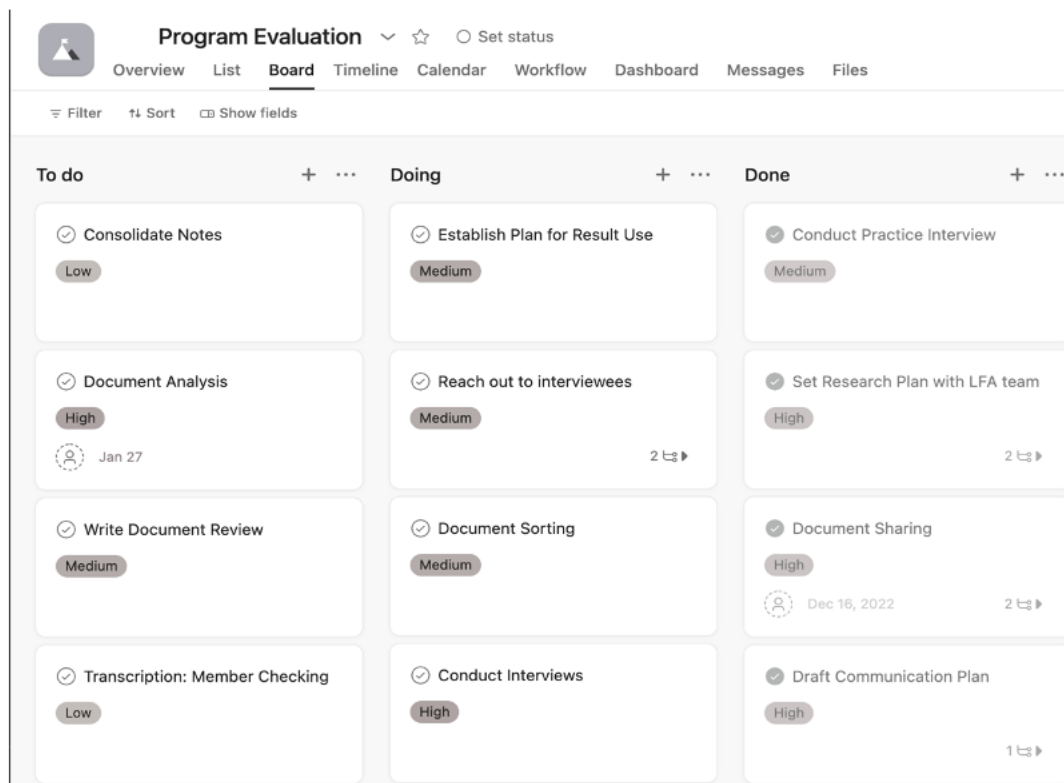
Post-pandemic, the local GED program is focusing additional attention on outcomes for program retention and successful GED test completion, which contributed to the leadership team's request for an external program evaluation. In the wake of staffing changes and the forced shift to online learning during the pandemic, many of the GED program's foundational processes were discontinued.

The evaluation team's collaborative efforts for document collection revealed that the main data source, the enrollment database, was collecting inaccurate information regarding who had enrolled or re-enrolled in the program versus who had filled out the program interest form. The evaluation team also found the database of historical documents compiled by the previous team, while locating documents for document review. Because these documents were not readily available to the new team previously, they were not utilized in current program planning. The team was excited to find these resources as well as identify the enrollment database inaccuracies as they prepare to revise current processes to increase the GED program's volunteer rates, learner retention, and successful GED test completion.

## **Participatory Approach**

The base team at the local GED program initiated the program evaluation and actively participated throughout the process. At the onset of the relationship, the program leadership team met with the evaluator to explain the purpose for the evaluation request and provide background information about the program. After the research proposal prepared by the evaluator was approved, the evaluator met with the GED program leadership team to review the GED research literature and co-create the details of the evaluation plan. The evaluator held weekly meetings with members of the base team to fulfill the action items outlined in the plan. Discussions included topics such as program history, data privacy considerations, document collection, and initial data insights.

The collaboration of the team during the evaluation process allowed for each member to contribute their areas of expertise. For example, the data specialist led data-related conversations and inquiries, while the program director served as the “insider advocate” to initiate communication with staff members and students. The executive director contributed historical context and research throughout the process. The evaluator assigned the team both collaborative activities such as drafting the communication plan and locating program documents as well as individual tasks such as de-identification of student data, document sharing, and contact with participants. The action items, level of item priority, completion status, and item assignee for the research plan were organized by the evaluator using the Asana project management tool (See Figure 4). The tasks included the collaborative efforts related to the preparation and implementation of the evaluation plan as well as tasks specific to the evaluator’s role of data analysis and preparation of the evaluation report.

**Figure 4***Evaluation Organization Tool*

This approach not only allowed for distribution of leadership on the project but also prompted additional conversations, captured in meeting summaries and field notes, which provided context and enriched the data collection process. Through the additional interactions brought on by the participatory process the evaluator was able to learn historical details such as the origin story of the organization, the change in program leadership and site location in 2020, the inclusion of the department of corrections contract in 2022, and the shortening of the TABE assessment.

**Document Review**

The document review was the first collaborative activity outlined in the evaluation plan with the organization. The evaluator requested any documents or records to assist in answering the original evaluation questions by revealing who enrolls in the

organization's program, what the learners' experiences are in the program, and what current processes are contributing to program outcomes. The documents requested included relevant records, student data, and historical or current documents.

### ***Document Collection Process***

The program leadership indicated that the organization had an enrollment database and TABE scores but did not have additional documents pertaining to the GED program. The evaluator and program staff discussed what might be used as additional documents for a document review. The evaluator explained that helpful items to review could be described as any record, memo, literature, or document that would assist in giving more context about the organization, its learners, and its processes, design, or program delivery. Specific documents requested included: test scores, attendance rosters, enrollment data, the previous program evaluation, the organization's logic model, student individualized education plans, staff rosters, program literature, onboarding documents, training materials, progress updates, and/or meeting notes.

The leadership did not believe the team had access to most of the document types requested, but at the evaluator's request, worked with the rest of the base team to try to locate any historical documents of which the current team may have been unaware. After a month of inquiry and exploratory efforts, the team located a database of documents organized by the previous data specialist. This took the data set from being made up of test scores and enrollment data to hundreds of files representing information from all three of the organization's programs.

### ***Description of Document Sample***

With consideration to the volume of newly found documents, the timeline for the evaluation, and the need for the team to know what the files included, the focus of the document review changed from content analysis to a descriptive review. Rather than analyzing the latent meanings found in the content of the documents, the priority shifted to a more explicit, descriptive review of the documents (Braun & Clark, 2019; Morgan, 2022) to meet the organization's need of knowing what was in their document pool.

The documents reviewed by the researcher included the de-identified enrollment database, test scores, attendance rosters, volunteer and instructor training materials, the previous program evaluation, organization logic model, program schedules, new student screening, enrollment checklist, student snapshot reports, personalized learning inventories, board meeting documents, program summaries, procedure documents, feedback surveys, office forms, registration forms, internship forms, tutoring documentation forms, staff checklists, GED monthly instructor site report forms, GED topics appraisal, certificate of completion templates, program advertisement flyers, cultural celebration sign ups, employment applications, job descriptions, and employee snapshots.

### ***Initial Document Insights***

After review of the organization's enrollment database and score records, it was established that the data would need additional filtering by the organization to provide an accurate data set. It was determined that the enrollment data provided represented the data corpus of any person who filled out the interest form for the program rather than representing only current and former enrolled students. Additionally, the binders of

individual student test sheets will be further standardized and organized by the organization for trend and cohort data to be determined. The data specialist began work on this process as the insights were revealed during the evaluation process.

The remaining documents in the data set were utilized to contribute to the refinement of overall labels utilized in the code system. This included information related to the GED learner, their stories, barriers, supports, the teaching/learning process, teacher training, process benefits, endurance, ownership of learning, and support systems. Field notes captured the insights related to the documents and were used as a reference during different points in the evaluation. The document review provided information about the learners in the GED program as well as historical program priorities and processes.

The enrollment and completion data from the most recent terms of the GED program, the Spring 2022 through the first two months of the Spring 2023 term, are outlined in Table 5. The table illustrates the total enrollment for both branches of the GED program. The first portion of the table represents the traditional branch of the organization's GED program and disaggregates the data into the enrollment of the online and in-person delivery methods of the program. The number of returning students are represented as well as how many students successfully completed their GED test during each term.

The second portion of the table represents the enrollment and completion data of the organization's branch contracted with the county's department of corrections. The contract began in Fall 2022, so the data represents the outcomes in Fall 2022 and the first two months of Spring 2023. The data for the correctional facility's branch of the



program is divided into data for the correctional facility (student inmates housed at the jail) and the transitional facility (students released from jail and housed in the jail's transitional facility).

**Table 5**

*Local GED Program 2022-2023 Enrollment/Completion Data*

<b>Traditional Branch of the Program</b>					
GED Term	Total Enrollment	Online Students	In-Person Students	Returning Students	GED Completers
Spring 2022	17	12	5	3	1
Fall 2022	25	18	7	6	1
Spring 2023	29	19	10	15	1

<b>Correctional Facility Branch of the Program</b>					
GED Term	Total Enrollment	Correctional Facility	Transitional Facility	Correctional GED Completers	Transitional GED Completers
Fall 2022	35	28	7	6	3
Spring 2023	16	14	2	—	1

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

Both program participants and program staff were interviewed to gain multiple perspectives about the organization's GED program and the learners it serves. A semi-structured interview format was selected by the evaluator to allow for exploration of participants' thoughts and to allow the evaluator to ask additional questions as they arose

during the interview. A total of 18 interviews were scheduled by the evaluator during the evaluation period, with a total of ten interviews being completed for inclusion in the final evaluation results. All interviews were conducted using Zoom video conferencing with the exception of one phone interview.

### ***Participant Selection Process***

The evaluator and program team collaboratively constructed the participant selection process as part of the overall evaluation communication plan. The interviews and communication plans were separated into two groups: program participants and program staff. The timeline for the plan was for program staff to be interviewed prior to winter break and for program participants to be interviewed after winter break. The program director served as the “insider advocate” to initiate communication with both groups of interviewees. The evaluator drafted email communication specific to both groups to be reviewed by the program team.

After the team approved the communication, the director sent out the email message to all program staff. The message included the active consent form as well as information about the program evaluation, its purpose, timeline, and the invitation for participation in the process. Program staff were able to opt-in to be contacted by the evaluator through a link in the email. Those who filled out the Google form opting in to participate, were contacted by the evaluator to schedule a time to be interviewed. Three former staff members, recommended by current program staff, were also invited to participate in the evaluation process.

The data specialist took time to consolidate enrollment data and attendance rosters to create a de-identified contact list of current and former students. Using a mail merge,

the program director sent an email message to all current and former students to invite them to participate in the evaluation. The email message included an overview of the program evaluation, its purpose, timeline, and an invitation for their participation. A link in the email message linked to a Google form containing an electronic version of the active consent form. The evaluator utilized the responses from the Google form to contact the students who indicated they would like to be interviewed as part of the evaluation.

During the communication phase of the evaluation, it was discovered that the database of enrollment information contained inaccurate data. The data included information for anyone who had completed an interest form for the GED program rather than reflecting only those who had enrolled and attended classes in the GED program. This inaccuracy led to the email invitation also being sent to contacts who did not qualify for the study. Although they were listed as current and former students, many of the contacts in the database had never participated in the GED program. This inaccuracy led to several respondents misunderstanding the purpose of the original email request and completing the consent form to be interviewed. Some of these responses led to the discrepancy in the number of interviews scheduled and the number of interviews completed. Several respondents thought the interview was an opportunity to sign up for the GED program rather than provide feedback about their experience in the program.

To navigate through the barrier of the inaccurate enrollment and contact information, the evaluator set up interviews with students who were verified as current or former students in the program. The program director, in the role of “insider advocate,” also reached out directly by email, text, or phone to a set of current and former students

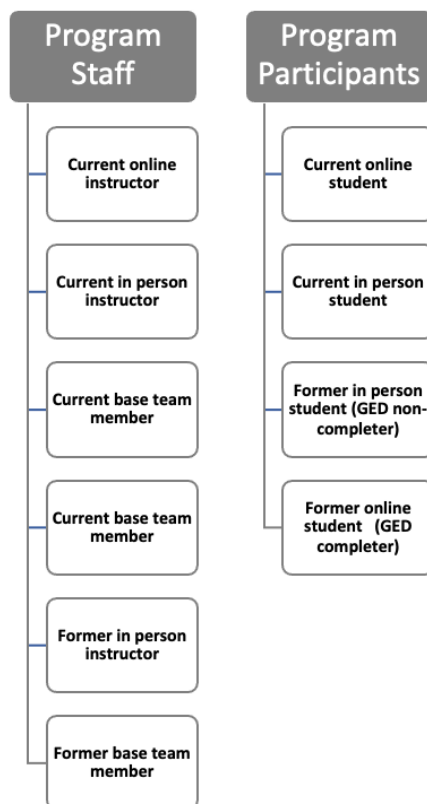
to invite them to participate in the evaluation. The evaluator also called the list of students originally provided to screen participants by phone and invite those who qualified to participate to be interviewed for the evaluation.

### ***Description of the Interview Sample***

A purposeful sample of ten stakeholders were interviewed as part of the program evaluation. Six program staff, including four current and two former team members participated. The current team members included two instructors (one online and one in-person) and two base team members. The former team members included one instructor and one base team member. Four students were interviewed as part of the evaluation, including two current students (one online and on in-person) and two former students (one online and one in-person). The two former students included one student who had not completed the GED test and planned to return to the program and a student who successfully completed the GED test while participating in the organization's program.

**Figure 5**

*Interview Participant Sample*



## Findings

The intent of this program evaluation was to investigate who has participated in the local GED program, the adult learners' experiences in the program, and the current processes that impact program outcomes. The information attained through the program document review, interactions, insights reflected in evaluator field notes, and stakeholder interviews contributed to the common themes found across the data set. This section will include a concise summary in answer to each evaluation question, distribution of stakeholder interview themes, a description of each theme, and both references to and extracts from the data to provide supporting evidence for each theme.

### *Summary by Evaluation Question*

The purpose of the program evaluation was to provide the local GED program with information from the research literature and program evaluation activities to answer the three evaluation questions, 1) Who has been served in the local adult GED program, 2) How do adult learners describe their experience in the local adult GED program, and 3) How do current processes connect with program outcomes? The following summary provides a short overview of evaluation findings for each question, while the following sections of chapter four provide a detailed explication of each theme as it contributes to each evaluation question:

**Who has been served in the local adult GED program?.** The results of the program evaluation reveal that the specific demographic information of who has been served in the GED program was unable to be determined due to the limits of the program's data tracking. The enrollment data utilized to track learner enrollment is

collected through an online interest form and collects information such as personal and contact information, program preference, education history, employment status, justice system involvement, and demographic information. This resource would have provided a complete picture of the pool of current and former GED students; however, it was discovered during the records review that the database included anyone who completed the interest form into the student database—inaccurately labeling them as a current or former student. There was no way to differentiate who was a current or former student and who had merely expressed interest in the program. Individual entries were both correctly and incorrectly identified with some current students being listed as former students, some former students listed as current students, and those who never enrolled listed as current and former students. The inaccuracy of the data inhibited further analysis of the information.

The information from program staff interactions and stakeholder interviews, however, revealed important insights about who was served in the program. The GED learners served in the program are students 18 years old and over who did not complete traditional high school. A subset of students is serving time in a correctional or transitional facility as they seek their high school equivalency credential. The adult learners in the program have varied backgrounds and school experiences that led them to leaving school and are often balancing life priorities with their GED studies. The learners in the program express a desire to complete their high school equivalency for many reasons mostly connected to opportunities for advancement. Learners often leave the GED program before completing the GED test and may re-enter the program several times before taking or successfully completing the exam.

**How do adult learners describe their experience in the local adult GED program?.** The adult learners interviewed as part of the program evaluation all rated their experience in the GED program as positive. They each discussed the challenges that made their learner experience difficult and how the program did or could better support their progress. Most of them compared their experience in the local GED program to their prior school experiences and rated the local GED program as favorable due to the understanding team, support for life circumstances, assistance with learning challenges, convenience, and consideration of learner needs. Each participant discussed their positive perception of their instructor, and words such as quality, knowledgeable, and supportive were used to describe the teachers and teaching assistants. The ease of the intake process, convenience of scheduling, and appreciation of the i-Pathways curriculum were key takeaways from the cohort.

The experiences learners expressed as opportunities for refinement involved resources and processes. They conveyed a desire for additional orientation at the onset of the program to explain the GED process and how to access resources and utilize the online program and testing features. They also expressed an interest in having access to additional materials such as school supplies, workbooks, textbooks, and additional practice materials. The students echoed the staff sentiment that they wished the practice tests were free to the student, as this may cause a barrier to how often a learner may take a practice test. In addition to learning materials, the students communicated the desire for additional engagement in class to involve more students in the learning and promote interest and active participation by more of the classmates.

**How do current processes connect with program outcomes?.** The document review, program team conversations, and interviews revealed information about the GED program's current processes and which favorably or unfavorably connected program outcomes. The intake, initial testing, and scheduling processes were noted as efficient and supportive of student needs by program participants and team members. The teaching and learning processes were also touted as positive aspects of the program by students, instructors, and program staff. The instructors have a GED-focused curriculum to teach and are skilled in teaching it to students. Learners are pleased with the i-Pathways curriculum and their choice of learning in an in-person or online format. Communication processes allowing student access to their instructor, program director, and success navigator are also helpful in barrier removal and support as learners navigate through the program.

The processes which were noted as areas of improvement and had an unfavorable effect on outcomes involve data management and tracking, documentation, teacher and team development, staffing, and personalization of learning. Data privacy, handling, storage, and tracking are all processes under review as a result of the program evaluation in order to produce more accurate information about the program and protect program data. Processes to manage enrollment and assessment data are a priority for the team for accurate reporting and data-based decision-making. Documentation, similarly, is an area of importance to maintain historical and current documents. Having both a process and system to archive historical information and manage existing documents is key to program functioning.



Staffing processes are another area of refinement discovered in the evaluation. Onboarding, orientation, and on-going training were topics relayed by the team and highlighted in historic documents. Team members expressed a strong desire to learn more through information-sharing, collaboration, and professional development opportunities. Processes for obtaining substitute instructors, transitioning team members, recruitment and retainment of GED program volunteers, and succession planning are also considerations in staffing processes. Ensuring all branches of the program (online, in-person, and the correctional branch) have equal access to communication, feedback, curriculum, materials, and training are all significant components of effective staffing processes.

One of the main takeaways from the data review is that the processes for personalization of the learner experience changed over time. Without the use of the individualized education plan and the processes of conducting learner inventories, goal setting, progress monitoring, and data tracking, the learner and instructor no longer had a learning plan to guide the personal journey of the student. Tracking of these measures also assisted with when to encourage students to take a test or adjust a plan as needed.

The evaluation questions are answered in further detail in the following sections. The themes representative of the findings are explained in relation to the research literature, evaluation data sources, and evaluation questions.

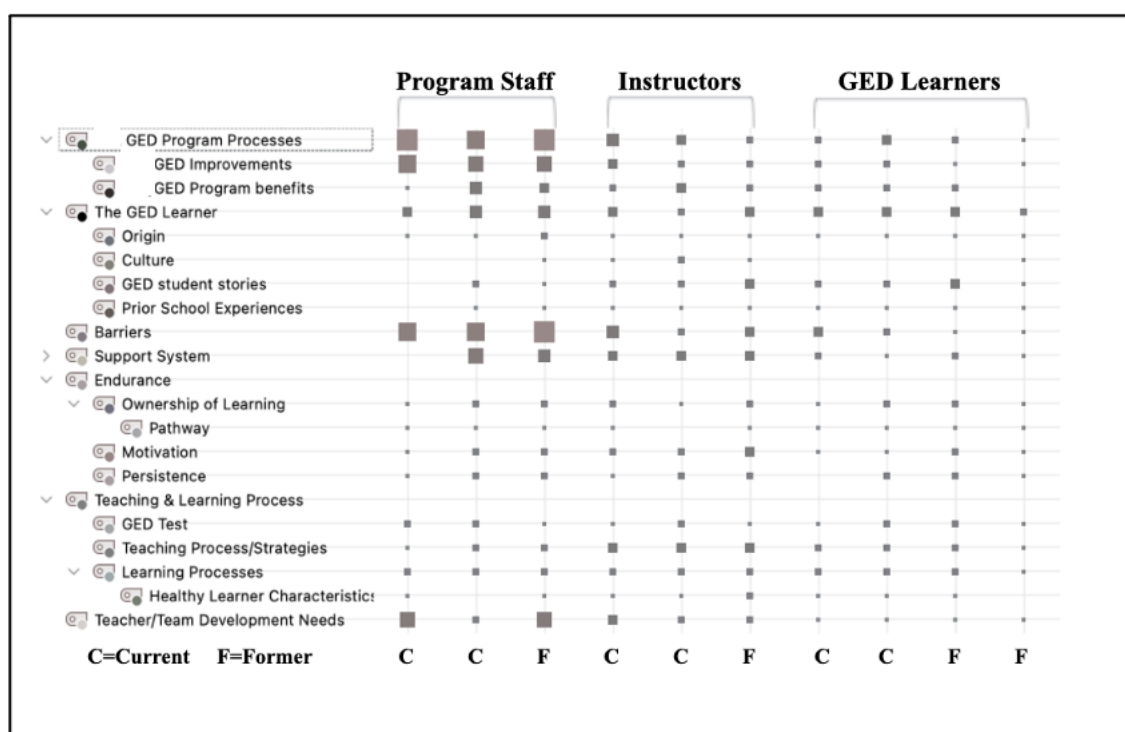
### ***Distribution of Themes***

The coding of the ten stakeholder interviews revealed how each stakeholder group and individual participant's responses related to the evaluation themes and sub-themes. The following distribution (See Figure 6) illustrates how the ideas expressed by current

and former program staff, instructors, and learners from the local GED program corresponded to the themes as they developed.

**Figure 6**

*Stakeholder Interview Themes*



**Theme 1: Understanding the GED Learner**

This theme relates to the background, experience, stories, and characteristics of learners in the GED program. Sub-themes included culture, prior school experiences, origin stories of how learners came to the GED program, and stories told by or about GED students which contributed to understanding the GED learner. This theme arose in the literature review in the discussion of adult learner needs and characteristics. Program documents found in the review which emphasized this theme were enrollment documents, student screeners, student snapshot reports, cultural documents, attendance

rosters, and personal inventories. Interactions with the program team underscored their emphasis on student-centered programming focused on the needs of the GED learner.

GED learners are adult learners whose background, experiences, and characteristics vary greatly. The teachers and students interviewed gave important insights into the life, experiences, and characteristics of the GED learner.

They're really smart people they want to get their GED. They want to impress their own kids with it. Everyone I've worked with is very smart.

I did not graduate of course, but I was a fine student. I had a little bit of an attention span issue, and I would zone out-- just space out. Home life was pretty haywire and everything, but I was a good student.

Some GED learners explained their experiences in other learning environments prior to their GED experience:

Understanding is something I didn't get in public school, you know. If you can't meet their standards or do whatever they want, if you can't do all that, then you're pretty much screwed.

I tried going to this alternative school. They don't have homework and the teachers are a lot more invested. It's usually a school for people who get expelled or kicked out or something like that. And that was great, that was amazing--better than regular school.

When I was taken out of public school and started home school, I felt like it was better, more engaged for me to understand all the questions and all the lessons. And, I felt like it was better one-on-one for me to understand what the teacher was saying in the videos and all the recordings and everything. I felt it was better for me, and I just felt like everything that homeschool taught me was a little bit better than the public school from my standpoint, because it was more hands-on.

One important aspect of the GED learner's story is their reason for pursuing their GED.

Each learner interviewed gave their reasons for pursuing their GED credential. Although each story differed, all learners hoped to use the credential to support future job opportunities or earning potential :

[My reason for wanting my GED is] probably career. I'm working all these jobs and then I got a couple of certifications with OSHA and a tool certification. I can only get so far with the jobs. I couldn't break through that next barrier without school. I had to have this certificate or have this training from this school. With my GED, I could get paid so much more, so definitely career oriented with the GED decision.

I am from Mexico, and I need it in this country for better work, for a better life, for a lot of things.

My job was being a housekeeper, and that's a lot of work. So, I figured I needed to further my education to get a better paying job, so that's my main reason why I started to get my GED. Plus, I have four kids and that can be a lot.

I was getting towards the end of my high school years... I didn't have a lot of credits ...my mom and dad sat me down and asked do you want to do another year of school, or do you want to just go get your GED instead? I thought about it, and thought I'll just do the GED. It's an equivalent diploma anyway, so I was just thinking let me get this out the way and complete this obstacle and get this done so I can move on to bigger and better things like my dream of going to school for digital marketing.

The needs of the GED student as an adult learner often look different than that of their high school peers. Program staff reflect on their realizations of adult learner needs:

I quickly realized that the people that we serve have needs beyond only their education, and sometimes those needs become roadblocks to the education that they want to have.

Our students are people who have families to feed and homes. They may have just come from a refugee camp or have lost loved ones. I mean it goes on and on and on, and their needs are as wide as those.

Getting their GED is a huge deal, but in their grand scheme of life a lot of times they say I'll get to it when I can. And so, they come to us and they're super excited and they're super motivated and a couple weeks go by and all that stuff that's on that plate starts to feel like a lot, because that's what being a human being is all about.

They come to us with a lot of fear. It's the fear of failure. They don't want to fail again. I don't know what challenges they had at home or whatever but that's what we try to help them overcome. We let them know that they're not a kid anymore they're much smarter. Their brain is more developed. We go through all that and let them know they are going to do amazing.

Program staff and instructors reflect on ways they acknowledge the importance of understanding the GED learner in their daily practice:

If we learned about anything we made a connection to culture, and it just enriched the experience for everyone and it was just such a cool way to learn and honor everyone's experience and who they are--who we all are.

I decided to just start to talk to every participant in the program to get to know them. The circumstances of how they got here education wise, and I learned a lot and that helped me know each one of them. I know the educational needs of each one of them and how we can better serve them.

When you sit down, and you talk to somebody and you know their life-- what they went through and what actually made them not get the GED and where they want to be, that will always help to change your perspective in how you interact with your students.

I think about all the stories that if you're there to listen you learn the stories, and you say Oh well that's how it's done. OK fine, so next time around when I have somebody in this situation, I will try to see what is their motivator.

## ***Theme 2: Barriers to Completion***

The *Barriers to Completion* theme relates to the setbacks and difficulties which make it challenging for the GED student to complete the GED program and successfully complete the GED test. Barriers may represent unmet needs or hardships that may lead to leaving the program before obtaining the high school equivalency credential. The research literature categorized barriers as dispositional, environmental, situational, or institutional (Goodwin, 2002; May-Varas, 2015; Quigley et al., 2011; Rice, 2019).

Program documents found in the review which emphasized this theme were enrollment documents, student screeners, student snapshot reports, attendance rosters, and personal inventories. During program team meetings, program leadership often cited barriers to student success as an important consideration and emphasized the conversations about

barriers during student enrollment and throughout the program. The role of success navigator was added to assist with barrier removal.

Before their GED journey began, learners often faced challenges during their high school experience. Interviewees shared some of the barriers that led to them leaving high school:

I was in an alternative school, and it was awesome, but I needed to live on my own out of nowhere and needed to get a full-time job. So it got rough, and I had to switch out school for a job and keep pushing forward.

I was a teen with a pregnancy, so it was hard. I mean, I did my 9th grade year with no problem, but 10th grade when he was here it was more difficult.

One learner explained that she was on track in high school in her country but after moving to the United States the language barrier made it difficult to complete high school.

In my country high school was not difficult for me. Here it is hard. School not difficult. English difficult. I need help for better speak English.

Students in the GED program face many barriers along the road to gain their high school equivalency credential. Program staff and instructors from both the traditional branch and the branch housed at the correctional facility provide their perspective on student barriers:

They did not complete high school and that can be for a multitude of reasons. Young mothers had babies at a very early age. We have an adult learner who was in a horrible car accident her junior year of high school that just completely derailed her life, and so she wasn't able to finish.

It could be drugs. It could be gangs. It could be transportation issues. A lot of different things. It could be prison time-- things that have gotten in the way of them stepping into their full potential. And so by the time they come to us, there's quite a story.

This one person shared that he saw his mom shot and killed in front of him by his dad. And I'm like well of course, I would have dropped out too, you know. I

would have been in and out of school too. He said he was in 20 something foster homes.

A lot of it is just due to their family structure and the discord. And a lot of times the criminal activities came later in their life.

Program staff reflect on the challenge of supporting learners through barriers along the way:

It was nearly impossible to ask them—for me to say, okay forget about all the crisis that's going on in your world and just focus on education and focus on learning.

A lot of them had the desire to get the GED, but either they have lost hope because they have fallen and fallen and fallen so many times that they don't believe in it anymore or they feel like it's too late, or they have so many things in life that they hang on to any opportunity to say no, I don't have time right now. But that's just fear.

First of all, they're mothers, parents. They have to make a living somehow and especially because they might start, but then they get a new job, and they have to discontinue. Or else sometimes they're frightened, especially some of the classes that we teach. They are pretty challenging, and some come into our class for instance well below the 10<sup>th</sup> grade level.

Barrier removal is one of the aspects of GED programming that allows learners to succeed. Program staff express their sentiments about ways they are working through barriers with students:

The fact that it's \$7 to take a practice test, that's very frustrating to me; and it's frustrating for adult learners. We are brainstorming ways to help with this.

The schedule is huge. We can't just say, okay, class is 9 to 12 just come. No, we find out what the barriers are and create a schedule that will work to eliminate as many barriers and excuses as possible.

The joy of working with the GED program is seeing students making progress and seeing them fight through all the adversity and still try to make it to class when we all know it was not easy.

### ***Theme 3: Support Systems***

Support systems relate to the network of support a GED student requires to assist them during their time in the program. One sub-theme which recurred in both the

research literature, program team discussion, and interviews is the teacher-student relationship. In addition to the teacher-student relationship, the support system also includes the relationship with other members of the program team, family support, social support, and peer support from other GED students. The document review illustrated this theme in the enrollment data, screening interview, student snapshot reports, tutoring documentation, and certificates of completion. Interviews and team interactions underscored the program's vision to support the needs of the learners in the program.

The support systems revealed in the evaluation process varied by learner. The lack of support for some learners contributed to them leaving high school :

There's a reason why a GED student is a GED student, and that reason is not necessarily having anything to do with themselves. But often the support system around them was not always available. So when something negative happened in high school, they may not have had the ability alone or the support system that was available to others to succeed.

One GED learner acknowledged the role of his family in his successful completion of the GED :

Definitely my family, my parents, my little sister. They continued to encourage me, and they would always tell me when I felt like quitting, it's OK ,we're going to go through it again. And we would go through the books and through the study material. They encouraged me to continue to keep going. They said, don't quit you're almost there. They've been the best support system-- my whole family. They kept telling me to keep going, and because of them I didn't quit.

In addition to familial support, the program staff discussed the current and future opportunity to leverage peer support:

A young guy who already graduated from high school is in class to be an assistant teacher and motivate and help with the other people.

One support I want to add is having some resources for peers that are in the class to be able to gather together to talk about challenges they're facing, so they don't feel so alone.



One of the most significant support systems mentioned in the evaluation centered on the teacher-student relationship. Program staff, instructors, and students all recounted how teacher support and attention to relationship enhanced the learning experience for the students:

I think that if they have that connection with their teachers, which I know that many of our students do, I think that connection just propels them to want to take the test and have the confidence to not only take it but complete it and pass it.

As their teacher, I think it's important in every class that I do, every time they walk in, I say thank you for coming to my class today. Because I know they didn't have to. It's all voluntary. It's not court ordered, you know, so I just thank them for being there.

My teacher for example had my phone number, so he would call me and he would check up on me and make sure I was doing good or keep in touch with me and see how I was doing and talk when I was going through certain stuff.

It's been really nice how the teachers will break everything down for you. And how they relate to you and how you can smile, you can laugh in there. The teachers don't act like everyone should be on a certain level. Not everyone's gonna be at the same level, so they'll break anything down and start from anywhere with everybody. That's awesome! It's been a really good experience.

The structure of the program itself can provide a support to learners along the way.

Program leadership and students comment on ways the program may support the learner:

It was important for us number one to know them in the program to be able to kind of cook something that will fit them and be tailored to their educational needs.

I also learned to know them in terms of struggles and what they are dealing with. So just sitting down and being able to listen to them I felt was finally therapeutic to them where they felt like OK yeah somebody can hear. I can go and talk to somebody about my problems versus I don't know where to turn to. And also they can come and talk to me about those problems and together we will find a solution.

I had times where I didn't want to finish. I wanted to give up because I was like, am I really gonna get this done. And it felt like it was taking so long for me, but I got rid of the distractions and sat down and learned what they're teaching and everything they're telling me. I felt like that pushed me to do better and get a

good score on the test. And keep me focused on what my dreams and my hopes are in the future. Having them really helped.

Establishing the relationships in the program allowed the program staff and instructors to assist the learners in other ways as well. The support offered acknowledged the learner as a person and assisted them both in and outside of the classroom:

It was important for me to be present with them because most of them don't have anybody they can talk to. They sometimes just need someone to listen.

Mindfulness cards and opening up in the beginning and doing a check in with them. [I ask] is there anything you guys want to talk about? How'd your weekend go? What's on your mind? So we have talk sessions for the first 10 to 15 minutes and I go around individually or just say you can skip today. Then I tell them something about what's going on or what I cooked for dinner or they'll suggest I cook something for dinner. I'll cook it for the kids and I'll be like my kids loved the idea of catfish and spaghetti, thank you. They'll be like, yeah I told you that would be a hit and so just kind of that back and forth.

I remember one time where a student came, and he was feeling suicidal. He was living in a group home, and he didn't tell anybody. But he came and told [his teacher] in his class. He came and told the teacher because he felt that we care more than the management of his group home.

It will require passion it requires investing yourself. Adult education programs are not programs where you can detach yourself. You have to be willing to listen to this and you have to be willing to culturally invest and learn-- be there with them ,walk the walk with them.

I do everything to help them. To me when a person learns well, two people are amazed. They are, and I am. I really love to see a person walk across the stage.

#### ***Theme 4: Teaching & Learning Process***

The processes of teaching and learning are reciprocal in nature, so as the code system was refined the individual codes associated with teaching and learning later became the *Teaching and Learning Process* theme. This theme includes items related to teaching actions, instructional strategies, curriculum, assessment, learning processes, healthy learner characteristics, and skill development. This theme was often referenced

in the research literature as it pertained to the teaching and learning of the content on the GED test in the areas of language arts, science, social studies, and math. The theme was represented in conversations with program staff about the Kaplan, Steck-Vaugh, and i-Pathways curriculums and how best to teach the GED learner to prepare them for the test. It was represented in the program documents in the form of TABE scores, training materials, program schedules, student screenings, snapshot reports, learning inventories, tutoring documentation, and GED topic appraisals.

Teachers and students discuss the challenges that arise with the content of the test and how acknowledging the need to overcome the challenges is a support to the teaching and learning process:

I don't lie to them. I let them know that it's tough work, and they have to work harder and harder to stay in there. And it's difficult because it's what they would do in four years through high school, and we try to do that in just a few months.

The hardest part for me was understanding and comprehending what the tests are telling me to do sometimes. It can be very tricky on the tests how they'll word certain stuff on there. But I think if you try to understand what it's saying and what it's telling you to do, you can get it done and you can complete the test.

The GED program is taught in an online format and in-person in both a traditional setting and at the jail. The setting and associated resources with each setting were discussed by interviewees:

The program in jail for example is four days a week, so it's intense. It can be done that way because it's in jail, so the audience is captive.

The zoom links I do think that those are very convenient when people can't make it into a certain class or a certain building that they can go and use those. That's definitely helpful.

The computer program that you can use i-Pathways has amazing tools. I did a couple tests and practice sessions with those, and it gave me a really good insight on how the GED test will actually be structured-- you know, how the questions will actually be treating you.

Two instructors and two students comment on the teaching style and strategies of the instructors in the program and how the teaching process contributes to learner success:

I like to use more than just our curriculum...I like to fill in a few things myself... I have had a lot of cultural and life experiences, so I have a lot to offer through that too.

A lot of students say we want to just get you as a teacher because you're so nice and just understand us. And the way you present the material is easier, because there's another GED teacher in another program and his way of teaching is just handing out worksheets. And that's really all he does, so they like my style that's a little bit more personalized. So that piece is missing.

If you get stuck, I mean a teacher will come right up to you and help you with that individual problem... break it down for you.

He would help me like, okay, when this problem occurs in the test try this. And he also gave me a book too to look at, so that really was helpful too. When he handed me the book and showed me when you go through the problem just go to this page and this page or he would go through the i-Pathways and on the zoom links and he would show us how he broke it down from point A to point B to Point C. And showed us how to get the same answer he did on that on the practice test on i-Pathways.

Because students come in at different learning levels various learning strategies and personalized learning methods are needed:

If a person comes in and they can read on the 5th grade level, then it's going to be longer and what we have to do is be consistent and give personalized learning.

I struggled with some of the certain stuff on the test like what does that mean and what does this mean, but when I finally sat myself down and kind of watched certain videos about what should I do how should I complete this test and even with the zoom links and everything, I took everything into account with how I'm supposed to get done with these tests. So I really just thought to myself, I need to comprehend and I need to understand better what is going on during this test.

There are various tests and some of them are much better in one subject than another so it's counterproductive to keep somebody who can just nail the language arts test and keep them with the rest of the class, when they can just do that and just move on with something else.

These students don't want to sit around waiting through all of these classes that are unnecessary to get it. They just want the quickest route, the path of least resistance. Get in, boom, get out of here.

Student-directed learning is another key factor in the learning process. Both program staff, instructors, and students recognized the importance of the student having ownership in the learning process:

A tool is needed that is convenient and available to the learner for them to assess their own learning. This will help motivate the learner.

I do one-on-one after I do classroom instructions and give them stuff, and we talk about it at the end of the class. I'll be like is there anything just you personally need with the testing? Do you want more of something? So they're like, yeah print off some more reading worksheets or math, and so I can do that as well.

It's the studying-- the keeping up with the work with everything else that's going on in life. But I'm getting close. I think I'll study it a little bit more, and go over some more material. But then I'll take a test soon.

Attending as many classes as you can, taking the practice test. Wish it was free, but being able to take that practice test to gauge where you are is a huge help. Definitely being able to write down and take notes everything. I mean it helps me remember things so much better --You can make the decision, I mean, you get to choose when you're ready and when you're not to take the actual test or practice tests. You make the decision as the student.

Engagement in the teaching and learning process was also discussed by students and instructors. Students relayed experiences when engagement lacked in the classroom and instructors discussed ideas to increase engagement in the GED classroom:

Maybe keeping people more into the lesson would be the best way to do it, because everybody wants to pass and get it done. So I feel like some people just need to interact more or the teacher should incorporate them into the lesson a little more. I would say I think that was one thing that I did notice.

If [this particular GED program] is going to have a much larger success ratio in terms of retention as well as in terms of performance of all the participants individually and jointly, it takes investing a little in gamification. Because it works for adults, it works for kids, it works for everyone. Right, people like games.

### ***Theme 5: Endurance***

Motivation and persistence were the initial sub-themes making up the *Endurance* theme. Motivation is described as anything relating to the desire to reach a goal or a tool to encourage or propel such desire. Persistence relates to anything having to do with persevering through to completion, overcoming obstacles, or action that leads to the follow through necessary to reach the goal. The sub-themes of motivation and persistence were prevalent in the research literature about GED learners and programming.

The sub-theme of Ownership of Learning developed during the evaluation interview process and connected with the sub-theme of Pathways. The Pathways sub-theme was one that appeared in the research literature in the form of Pathway/Bridge programming. The idea of Pathway in this sub-theme relates to learners taking ownership of their learning by connecting it to a future pathway to pursue after GED completion. This theme is represented in program documents in the enrollment and attendance data, the previous program evaluation, student snapshot reports, individualized education plans, and certificates of completion.

Motivation is a sub-theme that reoccurred frequently throughout the interview process. Both program staff, instructors, and students understood the role motivation played in the GED learning process as well as when motivation wanes.

Bring a goal that you embrace...your own motivation and create a habit that you produce as a learner. Use the motivation to reach the habit.

For some of these students it's taking years to get the GED, and I can imagine that really depletes energy. It depletes confidence and may make them not want to do it.

I do have one person that's facing a lot of years so he is less motivated. He just found out. He was sentenced around Thanksgiving, and he's an 18 year old kid. He won't be out until he's 40, so he is really giving up. But, he's still in the class.

Persistence is continuing to stay motivated and continuing toward a goal through setbacks and obstacles. Stakeholders discussed persistence and its nuances in the following ways:

Succeeding is a combination of determination and good circumstances.

One thing we see over and over again is, you know, Joe Smith is ready to go-- jumps in and in about 3 weeks all of that life that was sitting on his plate when he came, it's still there. And so now he's got to figure out how to juggle that and how to still continue on and keep that fire lit as far as getting it done.

The GED as you know is a really complex 4 subjects thing and if you miss three years of high school you will have to put in a lot of effort and most people want it yesterday and they don't have the patience to do it but what they will need is something to get them through it and past it.

Program instructors also illustrate how ownership of learning through pursuit of a pathway or a future goal can assist with GED learner persistence:

That motivator, oh, I see myself as a business owner. I see myself as somebody who hires people. I see myself as making my own engines. That's a tool to nurture those mental pathways and give them a purpose to learn—a purpose to finish.

I have two women in there that know that they'll be going to the state for several years so they're trying to cram it in with me and learn as much as they can to pass all their levels before they get there.

The instructors explored additional motivators to assist learners in persisting through to completion:

Help people help themselves to measure their progress that boosts their self-esteem from one day to the next with a clear goal and an achievable one in relatively short sight.

I joke with them that I am going to give them all a sticker chart. So every time they hand in their homework, the worksheet I give them they get a sticker on the board. Or this paper that I'm going to try to print out have some competition, because we do math competitions on the board, and we do hangman. So, they

really like that interaction too. That's why I brought up the sticker chart because it's just something to keep the competitive going.

Once they have the first week and think I'm good. This is something I can do. From there, we will check every now and then or I will always pop in the class. I have this rotation that I do where I always want to be visible with all the students, so this week I'll choose a couple where OK I haven't talked to you in a while. How are things going? What are you struggling with? I'll ask the teacher to always refer to let me know if somebody is struggling and if we need to do something. So when I meet with them I said, well I hear you're struggling with this. Do you think we should give you a tutor? Or what's happening? Then they will say, this is what's happening.

The encouragement that we gave to students is important because they need a cheerleader along the way. They need somebody to encourage them.

The instructors recognize the importance of motivating students along the way and acknowledging their progress and goal achievement. They seek to improve processes by suggesting implementation of incentives and student celebrations:

That's something that I would really like to figure out long term. Is there a way for us to say we will pay for you to go take this practice test? Is there a way for us to incentivize this? Because I do think being able to offer that it would be huge.

I'm trying so hard to get the department to let me bring snacks like popcorn and chips every time somebody graduates, so we could celebrate a little bit. Because it would motivate them because they do not normally get those privileges at the jail.

We need to have a better way to recognize them for the work they're doing in classes and a way to celebrate when they pass tests. I would like to see that happen. I would like to see them when they pass the test completely be able to graduate and have some kind of ceremony.

When asked for advice about persisting through the GED program, one GED completer gave the following thoughts:

I think you should think about your future what do you want to do in life. That helped me push myself further into completing it. To think about what I want to do after I get the GED done.



It was a really good moment when I finally got done with it. I'm not gonna lie, me and my sister cried. She cried first, and I was like oh, so then I cried. But, it was such a good moment when I completed it.

### ***Theme 6: Teacher/Team Development***

Teacher and Team Development are defined as any actions to provide professional opportunities for instructors, staff, and volunteers to develop in their capacity to operate the program and serve the GED learners. Teacher development includes instructional training, understanding of procedures, collaboration with other educators, and learning related to the needs of the learners in the program. Team development includes development for any member of the GED program's team including onboarding, scheduled training, performance feedback, team building, opportunities to collaborate, and professional development related to individual roles. Teacher development emerged as a theme in program staff discussion. They discussed current training practices as well as the change in training over time:

If people are interested in jumping in and teaching GED, we already have a sense that they're into that anyways. So they'll just make it work, but we do not have a training program per se for the in-person instructors.

We don't really have any materials that much, so I just rely a lot on the Internet and then I'll just type in a Google search for GED practice worksheets. I'll print off all the math worksheets, reading/language arts, science and I just find whatever I can print off. It's kind of how I had to do it. Some curriculum materials probably would be helpful. I definitely think some type of booklet with a real GED test in there and the topics that are covered. That way, I'm not wasting time on topics that aren't covered.

In terms of training, I wanted them to get the best out of this. There's no certificate required for teachers to teach in the GED program; however, I quickly noticed that you learn more as you teach and you're learning yourself. So it was a win win.

What we did was besides the initial training that they will get when they start as a volunteer or as a tutor, there is the annual Nebraska Department of Education training that I will encourage everybody to go to. That was huge for us because

this is the part where everybody comes from all over Nebraska to share experiences and learn together.

I will always do this survey with them and say OK if you need to learn something just let me know and we can pull the training together. So every training opportunity that I have I will always plug them in.

At the end of every session, and this was the hardest part of my job, to keep it consistent all the teachers can meet and we would choose one topic and then we'll develop that topic and learn something together.

Team development is another area that emerged as a theme during evaluation interviews.

This includes development of the program staff collectively or the base team specifically:

Just having a list of procedures for this is how we need to handle this data. This is who we need to talk to and these are the forms that need to get filled out. I think something drastic needs to happen, because it's very much lacking in my opinion.

I think it would be really valuable for us to sit down with the instructors and say we're going to make this system that we have in place really transparent so that every student that starts understands that we offer classes. We don't administer the test so here's what you need to do when you're ready to take a test and bring them into what do you think a cadence should look like.

This new technology and all that quite frankly I wasn't very familiar with, but they bore with me when I was trying to learn zoom. I was trying to learn quite frankly teaching virtually. Before I had a board I could write on and whatever but now what I have to do is say everything, especially in math and science. I do everything verbally and explain specifically.

Other types of development mentioned in the interview sessions included the desire for more specific training in their role or on overall program functioning:

I had no orientation, no instruction. It was just like show up, it's self-explanatory, so I kind of just made-up my own class.

With so many students there's always somebody taking a practice test or a real exam and they come back with the feedback. So then I can figure out kind of what's on the test.

I think if you give instructors tools that are available to somebody like me who knows quantitative methods and has an ability to spend 10 minutes a day to recognize where a student is from yesterday or today. That's not available to

everybody who teaches in the GED program, so if you make this available in an easy convenient way for the instructor, it will help.

Skill development classes-one of the most successful classes that we had for GED to get our students started with was where they learn how to take responsibility and learn how to make decisions. I don't know if they are still doing it, but I know it works.

### ***Theme 7: Program Process Improvement***

The program evaluation's focus on process improvement allowed for many opportunities for stakeholders to share ways they feel the program's processes may be refined. This theme relates to any area in which the program's design, delivery, or process implementation was mentioned as an improvement need. The literature review noted best practices for GED programs which brought up incorporation of relationships, pathways, and holistic approaches in program design and service delivery.

Using the participatory approach, allowed for many conversations throughout the evaluation process for the program team to share their vision for program improvement and the interview process revealed many ideas for ways in which the local program may be enhanced. The historical and current documents related to program process improvement are enrollment data, Moodle data, TABE scores, attendance rosters, training materials, feedback surveys, organization logic model, program schedules, student snapshot reports, individualized education plans, personalized learning inventories, program summaries, and procedure documents.

As the program evaluation progressed, the program team shared their thoughts about the need for process refinement as well as the continuous improvement process:

We need to put aside what we've been doing, look at what was done before and what we want to do now, and start from scratch from there.

We just need to have a sit down specifically about GED-- have brainstorming sessions and have a lot of “yes, and” moments to improve and streamline.

It seems like we're looking at it in the same way that we're looking at ESL. And I think we need to flip it to let's do this quickly. This is not like ESL. We want a high turnover rate positively of you're in, you're out, you're in, you're out.

Students expressed what they would like to see improved in the program as a GED learner:

It was kind of hard. Certain stuff when I started like to get online and the check in process was slightly kind of hard. And sometimes, I had to restart the whole thing. Help knowing what to do the first times would help.

More help for students learning English to understand English more, while practicing for the GED.

Offering more programs and websites to use other than i-Pathways, having student books to take home and materials in class like paper and pens would be great to have around. Also, offering some sort of worksheets or homework to take home and work on yourself.

Student support and recognition were also noted as areas for innovative thought and improvement:

One of the most important things and one of the biggest things that's missing from our current program is having some sort of GED student support group in place. And I don't know how often that would meet or when that would meet. I don't know what the cadence would be, but it's needed.

Peer support would help so when it starts to get hard, being able to offer those once a week meetings or every other week meeting where you can sit and say, here's how this is feeling hard.

I would say support them periodically by making sure that they're recognized for the work they're doing in classes.

Personalization of student-related processes was a common theme in stakeholder feedback. Program staff indicated the need for individualized education plans, inventories, goal tracking, and progress monitoring.

I honestly think there needs to be just more personalization at every step starting with individual learning plans for each student.

We can make processes with students easier with what CRM's [customer relationship management tools] call a journey where for each student you have a journey that's set up. So week one, we're going to have this in-depth conversation, we're going to get to know you a little bit better to see how we can best fit your needs. In two weeks we're going to send an automatic e-mail saying how is everything going, seeing if you need anything. After two months, you get the notification flag, OK it's been two months. Let's check in with the student and see how it's going. How's their progress? Do we need to change anything?

There was leg work that we were doing with the student. We had these couple sheets learning profiles, interest forms, and inventories. I don't know if they are still using it but we would have them fill it out to show what will make them successful or how they learn best or accept feedback well and how they feel and all of that. We passed it to the teachers, so they can use it.

For so long our focus has just been why is there such an issue with retention, but one of the issues with retention is that a lot of times our adult learners feel like they're just sort of floundering. Like well OK, so I'm just going to keep studying and studying and showing up to class. So I think having a system in place that says ,okay you've been attending for a month, why don't you go ahead and take a practice test in whatever area you feel most comfortable in. I think that would help.

Much of the feedback was regarding operations-focused processes in the areas of data management, documentation, staffing, and training procedures:

We have some data like TABE scores and attendance, but they seem inefficiently tracked.

The CRM would kind of streamline everything instead of having to look through all of the attendance records and highlight who needs to be called and making a list and then calling them. Having some sort of system set up where a student is flagged if they don't attend four consecutive classes. We get a notification and call them.

For students there's no tracking system or anything it's just knowing them. So maybe some type of more official excel spreadsheet of the students and where they're at, what they've tested at prior, what tests need to be done. Just something to keep track of everybody.

A monthly report used to be created with a summary of everything that happened and a clear picture of where the volunteers, the students, and the classes are. Everything that we needed to know.

Staffing, onboarding, and training suggestions were offered during interviews with considerations for new, current, and exiting team members

A list of responsibilities is really important to have somewhere because that changes all of the time and things are added all of the time. This is good for both new hires and also just for our team to know what we are responsible for, because there's a lot of ambiguity.

A plan for when someone is leaving so it is easier when someone comes. Procedures to make sure your files are organized in this way and to be open to answering questions. Just having some set of procedures for how to pass the torch and make sure all of the data that you have to the best of your ability is able to be passed on and kept at the end of your job.

I think the training of teachers even those that completed other degrees is important. We all have so much background but can still learn more, since so much of it has to do with the teachers.

One of the things that kept me going as part of the problem that we're in right now is that years ago we had teacher conferences. We were part of the state and we would go have conferences each year. That really helped us stay up to date, meet other educators, and learn new strategies.

### ***Theme 8: Program Process Benefits***

The theme of *Past and Present Program Benefits* refers to the aspects of the local program which stakeholders deemed valuable assets and beneficial to their individual or program success. This theme included historical benefits which stakeholders noted worked well in the past and may or may not be a continuing practice. The theme also involves the benefits stakeholders note are currently benefiting learners, team members, and program progress. This theme is evident in the literature review as the key components of exemplar programs, such as GED learner non-cognitive skill

development, the role of positive relationships, barrier support, and bridges to the next path.

Discussion with the program base team reveals human connection and prioritizing relationship as common benefits of the program. The experience and dedication of the teachers was celebrated, and the i-Pathways curriculum was greatly touted as a learning resource. Some of the documents related to benefits found in the review are training materials, organization logic model, program schedules, student screening, enrollment checklists, student snapshot reports, personalized learning inventories, program summaries, feedback surveys, cultural celebration documents, certificates of completion, and individualized education plans.

Many of the comments of the stakeholders communicated the ways in which the local GED program supported their needs. Students in the program especially appreciated the student-focused approach:

They're very understanding. They're not gonna kick me out or suspend me for having my life get in the way of school or something. I don't gotta worry about my life causing school life to get messed up.

I felt like they were really trying to see you succeed. And they don't want to see you fail. They didn't show you something and then just walk away from it. They show you and if you didn't understand, they'll take the time out of their day to show you again and again how they got to that solution. So I felt like they were super genuine and they were there. That really helped me.

They're pretty open and they make it pretty easy, because if I need help they're willing to help. They'll stay online and if someone needs one-on-one sessions they're there. So the help's there.

I thank everybody in the process for showing me it can be done. I'm thankful for them giving me the opportunity to take the GED and keep me on the right track. So I'm very thankful for that.

I started there a few months ago, and it's been a year and a half since I've been out of high school. They gave me a little brief example of what they'd do and ever since then it's been great. A lot of inspiration.

The GED program staff worked intentionally to create an atmosphere of convenience and support conducive to student thriving:

The convenience is definitely a top priority for everybody to get in there.

I thought the program was really good. They really know how to incorporate you into the system very well, and I think that the teachers that they selected know what they're doing. They are genuine about you passing the test.

I think that particularly when you're working with adult learners in our GED program who are facing a lot of or have faced a lot of life challenging circumstances, I think that human connection piece is so important. And I think that we do that really really well.

I think what we do speaks to people because they feel seen, and they feel heard. And I think that that above all else is the key to most things.

We wanted them to feel like home. We wanted to feel that this is their program. We did simple stuff, small stuff like celebrating at the end of the session.

Processes that are noted to work well by stakeholders in the program were shared by interviewees:

To register for classes a person goes online, and then I am the initial point of contact for every single student that registers with us. So I would reach out and say welcome. I'm [the program director] it looks like you're interested in taking GED classes with us. Is this correct? And then they would write back and I let them know that the first step of the process is to take that TABE assessment, which takes about 45 minutes from start to finish. I let the learner know that it just allows us to see where you're sitting in the areas of math, reading, and language. They come and take it and sometimes it's the next day and sometimes it's in a week. But as soon as that assessment is done and scored, it is up to them how quickly they want to start classes.

I think one thing that really appeals to people in general is being able to choose between that online platform and the in-person platform. The other thing I think that works really well for a lot of our adult learners is that we allow them to take a combination of both of those, so if a learner wants to take a portion of our online class in addition to attending the in-person class they could do that.



I think our instructors are phenomenal people who know when to bring the love and know when to bring the firm. They are just so committed to the advancement of these adults who are just trying to do better and be better. Having really incredible instructors obviously creates such a solid foundation for that, so I adore our instructors.

## **Summary**

This chapter detailed the approaches utilized in the evaluation, a detailed program description, as well as the evaluation findings. It begins with connecting the evaluation back to the evaluation questions as well as how each data source was integrated in the evaluation plan. The strength of the participatory approach was highlighted, and examples were provided of the collaborative inquiry and action that enriched the evaluation process.

An overview of data collection and analysis was provided for each data source, including a description of the samples and the role of each element in the refinement of evaluation themes. A comprehensive report of the evaluation themes connected themes to each data source. The evaluator field notes were integral in connecting and contextualizing the insights from the document review and interviews. Each theme was supported through reference to current or historic program documents exemplifying the theme. Additionally, extracts from the semi-structured interviews were cited to provide stakeholder voice to the findings.

Chapter five will provide further interpretation and implications of the findings as well as offer recommendations and action steps for program improvement. The evaluation will conclude with considerations for future research.

## **Chapter 5: Implications & Recommendations**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this program evaluation was to provide insight to a local GED program about the learners in their program, their experiences, and the processes connecting with outcomes. The program staff were specifically interested in improvements that could be made to improve student retention and GED test completion. The design of the evaluation allowed for a document review and semi-structured interviews of current and former program staff and students in the local program.

This chapter will provide an interpretation of the evaluation findings in the form of implications and recommendations. The implications will be based on groupings of the evaluation themes (Group 1: Understanding the GED Learner, Barriers to Completion, and Support Systems, Group 2: Teaching & Learning Process, Endurance, and Teacher/Team Development, and Group 3: Program Process Improvement and Program Process Benefits). Each grouping will be interpreted based on the original evaluation questions:

1. Who has been served in the local adult GED program?
2. How do adult learners describe their experience in the local adult GED program?
3. How do current processes connect with program outcomes?

### **Implications**

#### ***Implications of Group One Themes***

The first group of themes includes Understanding the GED Learner, Barriers to Completion, and Support Systems. These themes were grouped based on the

interrelationship of the themes. Understanding the GED learner includes learning about the role of barriers in their education journey. In order to address those barriers, support systems are needed. Whether the learner has or does not have an adequate system of support greatly impacts the ability for the student to successfully navigate the barriers they may face as they prepare for the GED test.

This group of themes addresses all three evaluation questions. Additionally, each theme is addressed through the experiences shared by students and program staff as well as in the information from the document review. Prior school experiences, family support level, and individual challenges give insight into the learners' GED origin stories. Many learners cite educational advancement, job opportunities, and earning potential as motivation for returning to pursue their GED credential. A variety of barriers were discussed including dispositional barriers, such as fear of failure, situational barriers, such as teen pregnancy, environmental barriers, such as poverty, and institutional barriers, such as negative school experiences.

Understanding the life experiences, strengths, and challenges of the GED learner allows the program to provide more supportive programming. The system of support the student requires to remain in the program through GED completion includes strong program support. This is similar to the holistic programs named as best practice programs in the literature review. These programs prioritize a wrap-around model in which barrier support is a key component. The teacher-student relationship is one of the important components of a strong program. The instructors in the local GED program were celebrated by all stakeholder groups as strong teachers who prioritize student relationship as a means of teaching their students well.

The document review findings showed that the enrollment database and student score records need to be updated to offer a clear picture of who is and has been in the program. When this data becomes available, it can be used to review trends and tell the story of the program and the learners in the program. Data tracking, documentation, and progress monitoring are all components of the program that will assist in providing support as barrier removal to the GED learner.

### ***Implications of Group Two Themes***

The second group of themes includes Teaching & Learning Process, Endurance, & Teacher/Team Development. These themes were grouped due to endurance playing a key role in the teaching and learning process and the professional development of the program team being central to service delivery for a smooth teaching and learning process. This theme group assists in answering the original evaluation questions, because learners and program staff were able to share more about the GED learners and their experiences as they discussed learning encounters and learner characteristics with the evaluator. The teaching and learning processes, team development needs, and strategies to promote learner endurance all pertained to how processes connect with program outcomes.

As with the last theme group, Group two focuses on the needs of the GED learner. As adult learners, the learning needs of the students in the program differ from when they were younger. One sub-theme that emerged in the evaluation findings was the significance of the learner's ownership of learning. If GED learners, do not connect their own meaning or goals to the outcome of the learning, they will have difficulty attaining the goal. This is a key factor in persistence and is one reason why students who attached

their learning goal to a future pathway found additional success in using the motivator of the pathway as a contributor to persistence.

In addition to ownership of learning, engagement was found to be central to learner success. Since teaching and learning are reciprocal processes, the more engaging the teaching, the more engaged the learner. This presents another reason it is foundational for teachers to understand the GED learner. Students in GED programs must learn large volumes of information in short periods of time, so finding engaging ways to interact with the information is needed. One innovative idea from the evaluation findings is to utilize gaming as an engagement tool and natural motivator for learners.

Without a means to know what motivators, interests, cultural aspects, learning styles, and non-cognitive skills are needed, instructors will not have the information to personalize the teaching to meet the needs of the learner. For this reason, personalization of learning was another sub-theme that emerged in the research. Opportunities for students to share learning styles and preferences as part of crafting an individualized education plan is helpful in tailoring instruction to their learning needs.

Team development was another important factor that emerged in the findings. An essential aspect of addressing this theme is exploring former program practices which centered progress monitoring, assessment, goal setting, and personalized learning plans. These practices allow teachers and learners to create a clear trajectory for student success, opportunities to monitor progress, and a clear timeline for completion. These actions are not only supportive of strong teaching and learning practices but also serve as engaging motivators, which become persistence-building tools.

The takeaway from the teacher and team development theme is that teachers and all other team members need opportunities to grow professionally. Many of the former professional development strategies provided intentional focus on teacher and team development as a means of meeting the support and growth needs of the program team. Instructors and program staff expressed great interest in learning more about their role, meeting with the base team more often and more effectively, collaborating with other professionals, and gaining additional knowledge about procedures and processes to improve their work and student outcomes.

### ***Implications of Group Three Themes***

Group Three is made up of the program process themes. These themes relate to the original evaluation questions because they address how the current processes are serving the GED program. The program improvements focus on refining overall processes with the program team, clarifying data and documentation procedures, planning for team development, outlining staffing procedures, and adding personalized learner components back to the program. A Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system was mentioned throughout program team interviews as a possible tool to manage the learner experience, create workflows, and store and analyze data.

The current data and documentation processes did not support the original data analysis goals of the evaluation. The document review and interviews disclosed the need for more rigorous data management and more extensive documentation. Not having the historical documents available to new team members has created additional work for the team to recreate documents and processes that were previously established. The inaccuracy of the data in the enrollment database and inconsistency of the TABE score

data prevented additional data analysis to be conducted that would have supported the outcomes of the evaluation and program data needs.

Staffing processes were an aspect which team members hoped to refine. This included on-boarding, orientation, on-going training, information sharing, absence management, and succession planning. By further developing workflows and clarifying roles, resources, and support, the team will work more efficiently. Processes such as volunteer recruitment and retention, contractor communication and support, securing substitutes, and data and documentation management were common suggestions for improvement.

The strengths of the program's processes include relationship-centered programming and student-focused planning. The convenience of the program is one of the factors cited as a benefit to adult learners. The student enrollment process is straightforward and easy to complete, allowing an applicant to begin the program promptly after completing the steps of the enrollment process. They are personally contacted by the program director and tested in person as an initial contact. The program's schedule is flexible and allows a learner to participate online, in-person, or at the local correctional facility. Classes are available in the daytime or in the evening to optimize scheduling options.

The program team in the local GED program is its strength. The leadership team is open to learn and ready to change, and the team is eager to innovate and elevate alongside them. One example of leading through change is how the team pivoted during COVID to continue programming in a new online format. The transition resulted in adoption of the web-based i-Pathways curriculum, which provides a flexible,

personalized learning option for students. Another example of shifting is the addition of new team members to the team. The added roles increase the team's capacity to implement changes related to data and GED learner support.

The origin story of how each team member joined the local program's team reveals a purpose stronger than a mere job. This passion propels the interactions and relationships they have built with students. The instructors work hard to use the resources they have to meet the needs of the students in their classes and seek to learn and do more. The program team is full of ideas and excited to implement the changes they deem important to their mission.

### **Recommendations**

The recommendations provided in the following section are based on the findings of the qualitative program evaluation of the local GED program. The recommendations provide insight to the program leadership regarding the original evaluation questions, which were asked to gain clarity on program processes and how to improve retention and GED completion rates.

Recommendations for the local GED program are organized according to the themes generated from the evaluation data analysis. Each recommendation is specific to the local GED program but also serve to offer foundational understandings to similar GED programs. The practices highlighted in the following recommendations focus on the GED best practices outlined in the research literature and are prefaced by a representative quote from a program stakeholder interviewed during the evaluation.



### ***Recommendation 1: Individualization of Education Plans***

“Individual learning plans for each student--that’s where the real work is, and it's also where we see the difference for our students. We're saying learning for all, we're not saying all have to learn the same way.” -Former program staff member

The personalization of learning required to meet the needs of GED learners can be acquired through quality individualized instruction that only exists through personalization. Fergusen & Aitken (2019) explore the role of personalization in adult learner success and describe it as a process that allows learners to have their learner experience tailored based on prior knowledge, readiness, interest, and support needs. This form of personalization is possible in GED programming through incorporation of learning inventories, assessment of readiness, and creation of individualized learning plans (IEPs) for each student.

Similar to the individualized education plans (IEPs) often utilized in special education programs, the GED learner also benefits from a structured, customized learning plan. Bachke (2015) synthesizes the literature on IEPs by defining the plan’s purpose as strengthening the learner’s education and characterized the important aspects of an IEP as 1) reflecting a deep knowledge of learner needs and readiness, 2) outlining goals to meet specific skill, content, and curriculum objectives, and 3) being useful in the teaching and learning process.

Individualized education plans assist in personalizing the teaching and learning process for GED learners. IEPs should be created for each learner with data points, goals, and benchmarks. Learners’ Educational Functioning Levels (EFLs) should be assessed at the onset of programming and periodically thereafter as a measure for goal setting and progress monitoring (Miller & Johnson, 2020). Learning inventories should

be utilized to determine specific learning strategies to incorporate in the plan. Progress conversations will help the program team ensure each learner understands where they are and where they are going on their personal GED journey.

**Strategic Action Steps.** The action steps recommended by the evaluator to assist the program team in personalizing the learner experience are as follows:

- Create Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for each learner with clear goals, objectives, and progress monitoring measures
- Conduct Learning Inventories as part of the intake process to incorporate learner preferences and learning styles into the teaching and learning plan
- Track learners' Educational Functioning Levels (EFLs) as a measure of progress and tool to determine if adjustments should be made to student learning plans

### ***Recommendation 2: Skill Development***

“We're going to make this system that we have in place really transparent so that every student that starts understands here's what you need to do and the cadence for the program.” -Current program staff member

GED learners have unique needs as non-traditional students and often benefit from additional skill development to strengthen healthy learner characteristics.

Preparation programming is a best practice in GED programs in which additional skill development is incorporated. Anderson (2017) noted the importance of preparing GED students in understanding the GED curriculum, available resources, and challenges they may face as well as practical skills such as relationship-building and computer skills.

Hutek (2017) found that GED students needed direct instruction on test structure,

question formats, time allotments, and the overall testing procedures in addition to the academic subject matter the test covered.

Non-cognitive skill development is also important to the GED student's successful goal attainment. Non-cognitive skills may include factors such as persistence, confidence, decision-making, problem-solving, and stamina which assist learners in persisting through challenges (Salusky et al., 2021). Many best practice programs, such as the exemplar showcased in the *Best Practice* section of the literature review (Kefallinou, 2009), emphasize the importance of persistence orientation as part of GED programming. This focus on learner follow-through at the onset of programming as well as throughout allows the learner to develop strategies and work with the program staff to create "stop out" or re-entry plans, rather than dropping out in crisis situations.

The recommendation is for the GED program team to incorporate an additional course or courses focused on skill development. These courses may be offered as part of preparation programming, new student orientation, as a requirement for all enrolled students, or as part of a skill development support group. The purpose of the skill development opportunities would be to tailor the offerings to meet learner needs. For example, persistence orientation would be a universal requirement, whereas other non-cognitive skills such as emotional regulation or general skill development such as computer training may be added as an individualized option for those who need it. Training on study skills and healthy learning habits will benefit all learners in the program, just as an overview of GED preparation and testing would demystify the processes for students. During progress conversations, the program team needs to ensure

the learner has a clear understanding of the components of the GED program, GED testing process, and how to access available resources and support.

**Strategic Action Steps.** The action steps recommended by the evaluator to assist the program team in including skill development into their offers are as follows:

- Incorporate non-cognitive skill development: persistence orientation, dispositional barrier removal, etc. into preparation programming or other aspects of the program
- Incorporate study skill and GED process training into the program for all learners to assist with effective study and learning habits as well as provide an overview of the GED journey

### ***Recommendation 3: Peer Support Systems***

“I incorporate a lot of competitions and time to talk into the classroom. They really like the interaction with each other.” -Current program staff member

Relationships with program staff are an existing strength of the program.

Expanding this network of support to include a structured setting for peers to support one another will provide opportunities for learners to share, learn, and grow together. The research literature recognizes positive peer support as a beneficial support system for GED learners. Peer support in GED programs has been found to increase learners’ positive feelings and engagement in learning (Goto & Martin, 2009; Holmquist, 2013; Salusky et al., 2021). This peer support may be in the form of peer mentorship, peer tutors, or peer support groups.

Peer mentors have been found to increase adult learner persistence in adult learning programs by three times as much as their peers without peer mentorship (Gopalakrishnan, 2008). The recommendation of the evaluator is for the GED program to initiate peer support in either an in-person or online format. Peer mentors or tutors may be peers currently enrolled in the program or a recently graduated peer for a learner to connect with for support. Peer support groups may also meet in-person or online and may focus on current coursework, personal support, course planning, or student-selected topics. Whichever format is chosen, learners will benefit from the opportunity to connect with peers who understand the GED educational journey and offer support to one another.

**Strategic Action Step.** The action step recommended by the evaluator to assist the program team in integrating a system of peer support is as follows:

- Offer a peer support option(s): mentors, tutors, and/or support groups to serve as a source of motivation and support as learners support each other through the program

***Recommendation 4: Highly Engaged Learning***

“If there were other programs to use to practice that I didn’t have to pay for to practice at home or when I had a break at work, I would definitely do it.” -Current GED student

Engagement is key to the teaching and learning process and is nuanced as it relates to the adult learner. As Gardner et al., (2021) point out, the factors that influence adult learners are often different than traditional students and must prioritize learner ownership, autonomy, relevance, self-directedness, and active engagement. These aspects of adult learner motivation and engagement are closely related to the six core assumptions of Adult Learning Theory, which postulates that adults are more likely to

engage in learning that 1) has a real world connection, 2) is self-directed/autonomous, 3) incorporates prior experience, 4) is accessible when the learner is ready and needs it, 5) is life-centered, and 6) is intrinsically motivated (Knowles, 1984, as cited in Gardner et al., 2021).

The recommendation of the evaluator is for the GED program to utilize components of Adult Learning Theory to enhance learner engagement in the classroom and beyond. As self-directed learners, students interviewed in the program evaluation indicated they would like additional opportunities to practice on their own terms and on their own time. With the volume of content GED learners must learn and review, providing a way to turn studying into a game, as suggested by program instructional staff, would be beneficial for engaging practice. Capitalizing on learner interests in the classroom to turn learning into a game and exploring electronic gamification for continued practice opportunities are both ways to engage learners through gaming. Exploring electronic gamification as a tool may present an opportunity for collaboration with a university or other strategic partner.

**Strategic Action Steps.** The action steps recommended by the evaluator to assist the program team in increasing highly engaged learning in the program are as follows:

- Connect learning to learner interest and plan instruction, activities, and practice opportunities to the interests as a form of motivation and engagement
- Create opportunities for learner ownership to appeal to the adult learner motivations
- Research options for electronic gamification of GED content to provide an opportunity for fun, repetitive practice of a large volume of information

### ***Recommendation 5: Learner Pathways***

“I haven't really set a goal date. I think maybe my teacher will tell me when I should take the test. No one really told me.” --Current GED student

Students are far more motivated when they have ownership of their learning and a goal to reach. This desire translates to persistence when there are measures in place to persevere through challenges to meet this goal (Gardner et al., 2021). For GED learners, a learning pathway needs to be created as part of their individualized education planning process. The final goal of the pathway plan should not be the GED test but rather a future opportunity the learner seeks after obtaining the GED credential. Helping learners identify this future goal and create a pathway plan with a timeline and achievement milestones strengthens their persistence. Shaw et al., (2015) found that program factors which assist students in building efficacy and persistence include goal-setting, progress monitoring, opportunities for self-directed learning for those who need to ‘stop out’, re-entry processes, and contact with students who exited the program. Pathway plans should contain the goal-setting, tracking, monitoring, and planning associated with these findings.

In addition to pathway plan creation, providing opportunities to celebrate plan milestones and goals along the way serves as consistent motivation. Celebrating student success is a critical component of the teaching and learning process and not only increases academic efficacy but also accelerates student learning (Marzano, 2010). Program celebration of those who complete the GED test will serve as a culminating event or graduation for completers, while serving as both aspiration and motivation for other program participants.

**Strategic Action Steps.** The action steps recommended by the evaluator to assist the program team in creating learner pathways are as follows:

- Create Learner Pathway plans for each learner with a personalized timeline, milestones, and opportunities for progress monitoring, as a trajectory for learner success
- Incorporate 'Stop Out' and Re-entry plans as needed to support the learner through barriers to continuous participation
- Implement a tracking and support structure for exited/inactive students as a means of encouraging them to re-enter the program
- Celebrate learning milestones such as number of completed program hours or learning modules, practice tests or GED completion—Implement a graduation celebration for GED completers

***Recommendation 6: Teacher/Team Training & Collaboration***

“We need time to talk to each other—like research on ourselves-- to understand why we’re achieving what we’re achieving. Time to go to conferences to learn more and talk to other people from other programs.” –Current program staff member

For the GED program to function at its best, its program team must continue to learn, collaborate, innovate, and adapt as part of a learning organization. Senge (2006 ) outlined the five aspects of the learning organization as systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning. The interrelated nature of these aspects focuses on the need for the individuals as well as the collective group to continue to learn about their roles, how to do their job well, how the organization operates, and how to build the collective efficacy of the team. As the GED program



implements the recommendations of the evaluation, it is useful to consider the components of the learning organization.

The evaluator recommends for the program team to prioritize opportunities for the instructional team and program staff to receive on-going training for professional growth. While onboarding new team members, in all roles and all branches of the organization, standard operating procedures should be followed for orientation. This will ensure all team members have the official training/history of the organization but also have an opportunity to learn important aspects of their role, organizational procedures, support measures, and where documents and resources are housed.

Staffing procedures such as obtaining resources and a substitute instructor as well as processes such as orientation, transitioning team members, recruitment and retainment of GED program volunteers, and succession planning should be updated for efficiency and effectiveness. Ensuring all branches of the program (online, in-person, and the correctional branch) have equal access to communication, feedback, curriculum, materials, and training are all significant in ensuring effective staffing.

All instructional staff should have an opportunity to receive training on the organizational expectations, while also receiving training on the GED test, curriculum, adult learning strategy, instructional strategies, brain research, and assessment. Opportunities for professional learning and collaboration will enrich the teaching team and benefit learners. The program team and leadership would benefit from networking with professionals in similar roles from neighboring GED programs to learn and collaborate. This will allow for content-specific professional and leadership development to enrich the leader and positively contribute to the organization.

**Strategic Action Steps.** The action steps recommended by the evaluator to assist the program team in enhancing the teacher and team development and collaboration are as follows:

- Refine staffing processes through a review of current processes to ensure equity across branches of the program (onboarding, volunteer recruitment, succession, etc.)
- Implement a teacher training and collaboration schedule to include external professional development opportunities such as teaching conferences and opportunities to collaborate with both program's team but also other adult education instructors
- Program team/ leadership will utilize the list of neighboring GED preparation programs (See Table 2) as an outreach tool to arrange collaboration opportunities with leaders in the same role

***Recommendation 7: Improvement of Data & Documentation Processes***

“There’s no way for us to have a collective understanding of the specific stories data would tell us, so the knowledge we have is very isolated to one or two people. Documentation and tracking will give us all access to that knowledge and understanding.” -Current program staff member

Continuous improvement in the education setting involves a “cyclical process of action, assessment, reflection, and adjustment, striving to spur change across a system, not just individual classrooms” (Yurkofsky et al., 2020, p. 404). The process is connected with theories of organizational learning and quality improvement but should be humanized (Yurkofsky et al., 2020) to fit the goals, needs, and practical reality of the organization conducting the improvement effort. However the effort is framed,

continuous improvement should provide ongoing opportunity for the organization to use a range of data sources to collectively evaluate processes with the focus of improvement.

This program evaluation was conducted to inform the GED program's continuous improvement efforts, and the data findings and recommendations will provide the opportunity for the team to reflect and adjust as part of their strategic action. The evaluator recommends that the program team focus attention on the program's data and documentation processes. Working as a team or collaborating with another entity to establish data procedures and security measures will be a positive step in creating structured data processes. Entering the score data into an electronic database will standardize data collection and allow for ease of analysis and reporting. Re-establishing the enrollment database parameters to ensure the enrollment data excludes those filling out the form as a program inquiry will allow for accurate data analysis of current and former enrollees. If a CRM is secured for these functions, it will also be helpful in managing student journeys that will not only provide needed documentation of student progress but also provide notifications of important student milestones to prompt team check-ins.

To avoid the previous documentation misplacement, the documentation processes must be re-established. The team will need to begin this process by determining which documents they plan to utilize as part of the program as well as where documents will be housed as working documents and archived as historical documents. Processes should also be established to detail the sharing of documents and records between staff and upon staff transition to avoid future document misplacement and gaps in document access.

The organization will benefit from outlining a continuous improvement cycle including a schedule for ongoing internal review and scheduled external program evaluation every 3-5 years to evaluate program progress. Creating a structured tracking, reporting, and evaluation timeline will be beneficial to assessing the progress toward evaluation recommendation implementation as well as provide ongoing opportunities for evaluation and reflective learning to assess the effectiveness of the program and its processes.

**Strategic Action Steps.** The action steps recommended by the evaluator to assist the program team in updating data and documentation processes are as follows:

- Partner with a strategic partner to outline new data management and privacy procedures
- Integrate a Customer Relationship Management System (CRM) to optimize data collection, documentation, and progress monitoring
  - Upload TABE scores to the electronic database for ease of access and retrieval
  - Update enrollment database to ensure accurate tracking of student information, including “stop-outs” and re-entries
  - Begin to track additional data points such as student EFL levels, program hours, GED test attempts, exited learner follow ups, learner pathway after completion
- Outline a continuous improvement cycle including a schedule for ongoing internal review and scheduled external program evaluation every 3-5 years to evaluate program progress

***Recommendation 8: Leveraging Current & Historical Program Benefits***

“You have been working so hard every day *in* the program that you have not taken time to step back and allow yourself an opportunity to work *on* the program. Now’s your time to take all the ideas and put them into action!” -Program evaluator

Many of the benefits of the GED program lie in its human-centered approach, focus on relationship, and positive action in the face of change. As the program reviews the results of the evaluation, the team should take time to celebrate all the hard work and effective aspects of the existing program before reviewing improvements or discussing changes. Taking time to honor the team’s continued efforts and beginning the process from the program’s “positive core” will serve to ground the improvement process in an Appreciative frame (Cooperrider et al., 2006).

Leveraging the strength of the GED program’s people is powerful. One recommendation is to utilize those in the newly filled positions of data specialist and success navigator to lead the inquiry and implementation phases of the plan in the areas which fall in the purview of their role. For example, data process improvement efforts should be led by the data specialist, while the peer support efforts and learner pathway plans can be envisioned by the success navigator. The strong relationships the program team has with students, families, and other team members will be beneficial as the new aspects of the program are introduced and implemented.

As new ideas are introduced, the team should look to the history of the program for guidance. Many of the brainstormed ideas and recommendations discussed during the evaluation were rediscovered as former practices when documents were found and interviews were held with current and former team members. Another recommended action is to convene the team to follow up after celebration of team strengths, to share the

full evaluation results and ask tenured members to share insights on former practices.

This provides an opportunity for the team to learn more of the historical context that may propel the organization forward into the future.

**Strategic Action Steps.** The action steps recommended by the evaluator to assist the program team in fully leveraging program benefits are as follows:

- Meet with the program team to share program evaluation results
- Develop an implementation and communication plan for evaluation result sharing and implementation
- Garner team input during process refinement
- Co-create an updated program logic model to synthesize program resources, activities, inputs, outputs, and short and long-term outcomes
- Utilize the data specialist and success navigator roles to implement data and barrier removal strategies
- Review historical documents and processes to guide process refinement

### **Considerations for Future Research**

This qualitative study utilized stakeholder interviews and a program document review to evaluate a local GED program. The evaluation findings highlighted eight themes and additional sub-themes, which along with the research literature, informed program recommendations. For the program to continue to evaluate program effectiveness, the evaluator recommends an external program evaluation every three to five years. A qualitative study capturing the perceptions of stakeholders about program

changes may provide additional insight specific to the recommendations implemented as a result of the program evaluation.

To expand the body of knowledge regarding GED preparation programming, additional understanding of GED learners, their experiences, and the program processes which support them are needed. Research specific to increased outcomes for GED program retention and successful GED test completion should be prioritized. The following considerations for future research are offered for the local GED program as well as the broader research community:

1. Follow up program evaluation with a mixed methods design (program specific)
2. Study on the effect of peer support on student outcomes (e.g., EFL gains, retention, test completion)
3. Comparison study comparing GED outcomes in the on-line vs. in-person format or traditional vs. correctional setting
4. Quantitative study on the effect of persistence programming on learner outcomes (e.g., attendance, retention, GED test completion etc.)
5. Study on the effect of exiting learner follow up on program re-entry, retention, and GED completion

## **Conclusion**

The program evaluation of the local GED program provided important insights in answer to the evaluation questions of who is served in the program, what their experiences have been in the program, and how processes impact program outcomes.

The participatory approach to the evaluation allowed the evaluator and the program team to create an evaluation plan to collaboratively select documents, data, and stakeholder voices to tell the story of program strengths and growth areas. An evaluation goal established with the team was that by the end of the evaluation timeline the program team would have action steps to assist in defining and refining processes to improve program functioning and provide the support needed to increase program retention and GED test completion. The plan for result use was also collaboratively designed and focused on sharing the results with the program base team to develop an implementation and communication plan to guide communication of results with stakeholder groups and outline implementation efforts.

An executive summary (See Appendix F) of the program evaluation provides a synopsis of the full evaluation report. It gives an overview of the evaluation, including its purpose, questions, design, key findings, recommendations, and considerations for future research. This document synthesizes the most significant information for the team to focus on as they plan improvement efforts and can also be used as a resource to communicate evaluation results with stakeholders.

The overall findings of the evaluation address the original evaluation questions, and the recommendations provide steps to address the needs discovered during the study. The overall proposed changes include further individualization of the learner experience, the addition of skill development programming, a peer support system, learner engagement through learner ownership and gamification, learner pathway creation and celebration of milestones, teacher and team collaboration and professional development, refinement of data and documentation processes, and leveraging past and present



strengths to update program structure and functioning. These recommendations will be complemented by a plan for ongoing monitoring, reflection, and adjustment by the program team but will be further enhanced by employing a consistent program evaluation cycle for external evaluation every three to five years.

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## **Appendix A: Description of Local GED Program**

The GED program which is the subject of this evaluation is one of the three adult literacy programs offered by a non-profit organization in Omaha, Nebraska. The organization, established in 2018, has an English as a Second Language (ESL) program, an Adult Basic Education program, and a GED preparation program. The mission of the organization is focused on assisting adults in the community in reaching their life goals through improvement of their “language, literacy, and life skills.”

The GED preparation program is offered at the organization’s main campus as well as three satellite locations. The program base team is made up of an executive director, program director, program coordinator, student success navigator, and data specialist. This team is assisted in their work by a group of GED instructors (one in-person, one online, and one at the correctional facility) and assistant teachers. The program staff deliver the GED programming to students who seek to complete their high school equivalency.

Once program participants enter the program, they are assessed to ensure correct program placement. The preparation program focuses on the core subject areas of Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies tested on the GED exam. Both in-person and online course options are available through the program with both daytime and evening scheduling options.

The GED program leadership requested the program evaluation as part of the organization’s continuous improvement process. Their interest is in learning more about adult learner motivation, barriers to success, and best practices of highly successful GED

programs. The focus of the evaluation is to use findings to increase program outcomes such as student retention, program graduation, and GED completion.

### **Appendix B: Grandma's GED Story**

When I asked my Grandma Betty about her experience earning her GED certification, her unexpected response was, "it all boils down to being a dark-skinned girl in these United States of America!" As she began to tell me the story behind her GED journey, I quickly found out how much we can learn by exploring the absent narrative of those who have lived through the experience of pursuing their GED.

Her explanation of why she did not complete high school did not begin with school at all, but rather, began with the messages communicated about her dark skin color in the outside world as well as in her home. She narrowed down the root of her disconnection and low self-confidence to the messages she received about how others viewed her skin color early in life. Internalizing these messages of colorism from both the outside world and home, Grandma quickly developed a feeling that she was 'less than.'

When she started school, her feelings of inferiority caused her to disconnect. School became a place for her to hide, rather than a place for her to celebrate all that she knew and wanted to learn. Because she never thought of herself as pretty or smart, she also felt no one would be interested in what she had to say.

As a young teenager, she met someone who told her she was pretty for the first time. She finally felt *seen*. It was not long after she began dating this young man that, as a 15-year-old tenth grader, she found herself pregnant. In those times, schools did not let girls attend school while pregnant, so she had her baby before returning. The school officials suggested she change high schools after her leave, so she attended another high school until she got pregnant again at age 17. Her father disapproved and refused to pay for her



to take the bus to the new high school. With no way to afford the bus fare to the new school, she dropped out in eleventh grade.

As a young, unwed, teenage mother, Grandma applied for support from the state. Since she lived at home, her father took the money she received to pay for expenses. After some years receiving state aid, she began seeking employment as a requirement to continue receiving benefits. She secured a job working at a nursing home, until she received notice from social services that the county was hiring at the hospital for entry level employees.

She worked at the hospital as a nurse's aide for some time before realizing she could make more money by advancing to the role of health attendant, which required a higher level of education. She found out through the social services program that she could take the GED test and obtain the credential she needed to command the promotion and higher wage. The social service program coordinated her GED test, and she scored high enough to not only earn her high school equivalency but also earn 3 college credits. The GED coordinator encouraged her to use the 3 credits to roll over into a post-secondary nursing program; however, now married, she did not want to further her education in fear that more education would cause her to make more money than her husband.

All in all, she attributes her GED completion to the social services programs she belonged to as a single parent. Through the process, she learned her capabilities, gained confidence in herself, and even found her voice. When asked about how she feels about her educational journey overall she said, "I lost a lot...learned a lot...and I'm still here. I discovered along the way that I have something to give and people to give it to—I can give

the knowledge I have and the things I have been through to teach someone else. And, after all these years the accomplishments of my children and grandchildren actually stem from *me*—that dark-skinned girl in these United States of America.”

## **Appendix C: Active Consent**

I am asking you to participate in a program evaluation titled EVALUATION OF A LOCAL ADULT GENERAL EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (GED) PROGRAM. I will describe this evaluation to you and answer any of your questions. This evaluation is being led by DérNecia Phillips, a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership Department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. The Faculty Advisor for this study is Dr. Tamara Williams, Educational Leadership Department at University of Nebraska at Omaha.

### **What the study is about**

The purpose of this program evaluation research is to provide insightful information to assist the local GED program staff and leadership in their continuous improvement efforts. The information from the participant interviews will assist the staff in gaining both team and learner perspectives about GED preparation and the local GED program. The information will also be helpful for other GED programs to assist in their learning about best practices in GED preparation programming.

### **What we will ask you to do**

I will ask you to participate in an interview, conducted either in-person, by phone, or through video conference, that will last approximately 30-45 minutes. The questions you will be asked will involve your insights and opinions about your experiences and knowledge about GED testing, GED preparation, and the local GED preparation program.

### **Risks and discomforts**

I do not anticipate any risks from participating in this research.

### **Benefits**

No direct benefits to the participants are anticipated. The expected benefits are more general in nature as the information from this evaluation may benefit stakeholders associated with the GED program as well as those who use the information to learn more about effective GED preparation programming.

### **Incentives for participation**

Participants will not receive any incentives for participating in the program evaluation.

### **Audio/Video Recording**

The interviews will be recorded using an audio or video recording device so the interviews are able to be transcribed and analyzed as part of the research process. The recordings will be archived after transcription.

### **Privacy/Confidentiality/Data Security**

All attempts will be made to maintain each participant's privacy and confidentiality. Identifying information will be kept separate from research data (e.g., signed consent forms will be kept separate from interview data and any other identifying information).

The principal investigator and select members from the educational leadership faculty will be the only ones who will have access to identifying information.

### **Sharing De-identified Data Collected in this Research**

De-identified data from this study may be shared with the research community at large to advance educational understanding. We will remove or code any personal information that could identify you before files are shared with other researchers to ensure that, by current scientific standards and known methods, no one will be able to identify you. Despite these measures, we cannot guarantee anonymity of your personal data.

### **Future use of Identifiable Data Collected in this Research**

Your personal information will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

### **Taking part is voluntary**

Your involvement in the program evaluation research is voluntary and you may refuse to participate before the evaluation begins, discontinue at any time, or skip any questions/procedures that may make you feel uncomfortable, with no penalty to you or your standing, record, or relationship with the organization or service that may be involved with the research.

### **If you have questions**

The main researcher conducting this study is DérNecia Phillips a doctoral student at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact DérNecia Phillips at daharris@unomaha.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact DérNecia's academic advisor, Dr. Tami Williams, at 402-554-3502 or email tamarawilliams@unomaha.edu.

*You may request a copy of this form for your records.*

### **Statement of Consent**

I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature\_\_\_\_\_ Date\_\_\_\_\_

Your Name (printed)\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of person obtaining consent\_\_\_\_\_ Date\_\_\_\_\_

Printed name of person obtaining consent\_\_\_\_\_

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for five years beyond the end of the study.

**Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol (GED Program Participant)**

1. Why did you decide to pursue your GED?
2. What factors do you think contribute to successful completion of the GED test?
3. How would you describe your overall experience in the GED preparation program?
4. How does the GED preparation program help meet the needs of adult learners?
5. What suggestions do you have for program improvement?

**Appendix E: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol (GED Program Staff)**

1. What factors do you think contribute to successful completion of the GED test?
2. What are the aspects of the GED program that work well?
3. What ideas do you have for helping more learners successfully complete the program?
4. How might the program be changed to make it more effective?
5. What have been your most memorable learning experiences meeting the needs of GED participants in the program?

## Appendix F: Program Evaluation Executive Summary

# Executive Summary of the GED Program Evaluation

### Evaluation Purpose

This program evaluation serves to guide the continuous improvement process for Learning for ALL's GED program. The program's review provides insightful information to assist program leadership in clarifying needs and refining program processes and systems of support. The overall goal is to determine ways for the program team to positively impact their student retention and GED test completion.

### Evaluation Questions

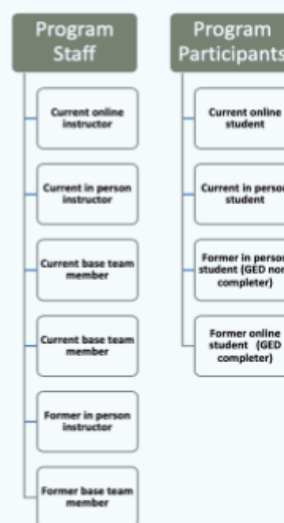
1. Who has been served in Learning for ALL's GED program?
2. How do adult learners describe their experience in Learning for ALL's GED program?
3. How do current processes connect with program outcomes?

### Evaluation Design

The evaluation design used in this qualitative evaluation was a single case study design, using a participatory approach.

Document review and semi-structured interviews were utilized as the data sources. Ten interviews were conducted of both current and former program staff and program participants.

Program staff included base team members and online and in-person instructors. Program participants included online and in-person students who had and had not completed their GED test.



### Key Findings

The findings from the document review and stakeholder interviews are summarized into the following themes:

- Theme 1: Understanding the GED Learner
- Theme 2: Barriers to Completion
- Theme 3: Support Systems
- Theme 4: Teaching & Learning Processes
- Theme 5: Endurance
- Theme 6: Teacher/Team Development
- Theme 7: Program Process Improvements
- Theme 8: Program Process Benefits

# Executive Summary

## of the GED Program Evaluation

### Recommendations

The recommendations offered by the evaluator are based on the evaluation questions and educational research literature as they relate to the key evaluation findings. The evaluator recommends that the program conduct ongoing internal program review in addition to an external program evaluation every 3-5 years.

#### Recommendation 1: Individualization of Education Plans

- Create Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for each learner
- Conduct Learning Inventories as part of the intake process
- Track learners' educational functioning levels (EFLs)

#### Recommendation 2: Skill Development

- Incorporate non-cognitive skill development: persistence orientation, dispositional barrier removal, etc.(e.g. preparation programming)
- Incorporate study skill and GED process training

#### Recommendation 3: Peer Support Systems

- Offer a peer support option(s) (e.g. mentors, support groups)

#### Recommendation 4: Highly Engaged Learning

- Connect learning to learner interest
- Create opportunities for learner ownership
- Research options for electronic gamification of GED content

#### Recommendation 5: Learner Pathways

- Create Learner Pathway plans, including timeline & milestones
- Incorporation of 'Stop Out' and Re-entry plans
- Implement tracking and support structure for exited/inactive students
- Celebrate learning milestones (e.g. practice test/GED completion)

#### Recommendation 6: Teacher/Team Training & Collaboration

- Refinement of Staffing procedures (e.g. onboarding, succession, etc.)
- On-going teacher training & collaboration (e.g. teacher conferences, opportunities to collaborate with each other)
- Program leadership collaboration with leaders in the same role

#### Recommendation 7: Improvement of Data & Documentation Processes

- Adopt more rigorous data management procedures
- Integrate a Customer Relationship Management System (CRM) to optimize data collection, documentation, and progress monitoring
- Outline a continuous program evaluation cycle

#### Recommendation 8: Leveraging Current & Historical Program Benefits

- Meet with the program team to share program evaluation results
- Develop an implementation and communication plan for evaluation result sharing and implementation
- Garner team input during process refinement
- Update program logic model
- Utilize the data specialist and success navigator roles to implement data and barrier removal strategies
- Review historical documents/processes to guide process refinement

### Considerations for Future Research

- Follow up program evaluation with a mixed-methods design
- Study on the effect of peer support on student outcomes (e.g. EFL gains, retention, test completion)
- Comparison study comparing GED outcomes in the on-line vs. in-person format or traditional vs. correctional setting
- Quantitative study on the relationship between persistence programming and learner outcomes (e.g. attendance, retention, etc)
- Study on the effect of exiting learner follow up on program re-entry, retention, and GED completion