



**FEDERATION OF PROTESTANT WELFARE AGENCIES**

Statement Prepared for the  
New York City Council  
Education Committee & Youth Services Committee  
Public Hearing:

**GED Preparation and Testing Procedures**  
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The Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies (FPWA) is a membership organization with close to 300 member agencies and church-based human service programs that serve an estimated 1.5 million low-income New Yorkers in communities throughout the City. We appreciate the opportunity to comment on GED Preparation and Testing Procedures in New York City.

The recent report prepared for the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), “Our Chance for Change: A Four-Year Reform Initiative for GED Testing in New York City,” is excellent in conveying the extent of the problem we are facing in terms of the sheer numbers of individuals who are out of school and also lacking a high school diploma or GED in our City, along with the barriers to GED preparation classes and the struggles faced by many to passing the GED exam. However, it is essential to examine these problems in the broader context of our workforce development system. Therefore, we urge the City Council to review this report in conjunction with the recent NYC Comptroller’s report, “Demands of the Time: Turning the Workforce Development Model of the Last Century into a Skills Education Model for Today.”<sup>1</sup> Taken together, these two reports reveal the full scope of the problems we face in connecting low-skill, low-income populations to the adult education, vocational training, higher education, and other workforce development services they need. As an organization that conducts intensive advocacy at both the City and State level on behalf of low-income individuals, our testimony will fill in some additional details in regard to these problems and offer several solutions that address these problems comprehensively.

### **Problems in GED Preparation, GED Testing and Workforce Development:**

1. **GED Student Stories:** *Students enrolled in a new college-focused GED preparation class were interviewed on the campus of CUNY Lehman College on November 25, 2008. These stories reflect their responses to questions about their background, interest in participating in GED classes, and recommendations for GED system improvement that will help them achieve their career goals.*

➤ “G” is 38-year-old male student from Ghana, West Africa who came to the United States at age 31. For three years, he worked as a home health aide providing services to individuals in Hospice care in the Bronx. At this job, he made \$7 an hour and was not offered any opportunities to advance or participate in education and training. He learned about the free GED classes offered

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<sup>1</sup> NYC Comptroller (October 15, 2008). “Demands of the Time: Turning the Workforce Development Model of the Last Century into a Skills Education Model for Today.” Available at: [http://www.comptroller.nyc.gov/bureaus/opm/reports/10-15-08\\_demands-of-times.pdf](http://www.comptroller.nyc.gov/bureaus/opm/reports/10-15-08_demands-of-times.pdf).

at CUNY Lehman from friends who had participated, but if he had known about the program earlier, he would have enrolled in it much sooner. He feels that many people who could benefit are not aware of the CUNY Lehman GED program, and therefore, miss out on the opportunity to obtain a GED. “G” enrolled in the class for six months and passed the GED exam. As an immigrant, he had to wait to pursue his college dreams until he achieved near-citizen status. At this point, he would like to take the college placement exam as soon as possible to enroll in CUNY Lehman as a full-time college student this year, majoring in medical administration. He suggests that the ideal college transition program would provide full information about tuition assistance programs and a transition advisor in all stages of the process – before, during, and after college enrollment – to provide career guidance and all essential information about college and employment opportunities in different degree programs.

➤ “L” is a 25-year-old Hispanic mother of two from Washington Heights. She was raised in a single parent home, as her father was incarcerated when she was three years old. “L” completed 11<sup>th</sup> grade in high school, but dropped out after becoming pregnant at age seventeen and getting married. “L” was later divorced after having another child and became eager to obtain her GED to advance her career and to increase her earning potential. She asked friends and neighbors about available free GED classes, but could not obtain information from them or any other source. Therefore, she simply began calling colleges in the phone book and asking about GED courses. Eventually, she learned about the free GED classes offered at CUNY Lehman. She struggles with balancing her studies with her parenting responsibilities, particularly since child care is only available to her during the day when she is in class. “L” strongly suggested that it should be easier for people like her to obtain information about GED classes and college transition programs, since it was very difficult for her to learn about the CUNY Lehman classes. She would also like a full college orientation to learn about all aspects of applying for and enrolling in college. At the time of the interview, she had not received any information about college preparation, how to submit an application, how to apply for financial aid, or how to decide on a major. She would like all of this information to be provided as part of the college-focused GED preparation class.

Note: The “college-focused” GED preparation classes at CUNY offer students a more intensive curriculum that includes college-level reading, writing, and researching skills. However, as these student stories reveal, these courses do not yet provide students with a college transition advisor or a full college orientation that GED students often need to actually transition to higher education.

**2. FPWA Survey of Adult Literacy Providers:** *This informal survey was conducted in 2008 to assess barriers to adult education classes, including GED preparation, faced by welfare recipients [Human Resources Administration (HRA) clients] in New York City.*

In an effort to learn more about restrictions to basic education for welfare recipients in New York City, an informal online survey of adult literacy providers in New York City was conducted by the Welfare Reform Network (WRN)'s Policy and Advocacy Committee (PAC) in early 2008. The results of the survey showed that the top three barriers to participation adult education programs by public assistance recipients were: 1) access to child care (80%), 2) receiving approval from HRA (50%), and 3) fulfilling other mandatory work requirements (50%).<sup>2</sup> Of the 18 program representatives responding to the survey, 33% indicated that students receiving public assistance were less likely to complete the program than students not receiving public assistance. Several commented that students demonstrating success in one program are sometimes forced to attend a different program selected by HRA. In addition, other students are forced to choose between working and continuing their education, instead of being given the opportunity combine them as the federal, state, and local welfare policies allow.

**3. HRA-Imposed Barriers to Education and Training**

While HRA is identified as the most extensive workforce development agency in the City in the NYC Comptroller's report, HRA clients do not receive the same type of intensive assessment, training, career guidance, job placement, and career advancement services offered to job seekers through the Workforce 1 Career Centers, which are overseen by the City Department of Small Business Services (SBS). Furthermore, the report exposes the fact that CUNY's certificate and degree programs in high-demand fields such as health care, education, and technology are not coordinated with the rest of the City's workforce development programs or directly with the HRA programs. Therefore, low-income individuals must navigate these disparate workforce development systems to try to create a career pathway that offers opportunities to gain new skills and increase their wages incrementally over time. It is almost impossible for those in poverty to achieve success when HRA, which can have enormous control over their daily lives, is so uncoordinated with other workforce systems in the City.

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<sup>2</sup> Data was collected in Spring 2008 through an information online survey, not through a formal scientific random sample data collection process. Responders were drawn from the NYC Adult Literacy Coalition (NYCAL) and the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies (FPWA) member agencies. A total of 18 responses were received; 67% indicated that their program was included on the HRA-approved list of education and training providers, available at: <https://a069-webapps1nyc.gov/atp/search.cfm>.

## Comprehensive Solutions to GED Preparation and Workforce Development Problems:

### 4. Holistic Approach to Solving GED Testing Problems: *Create a direct link between adult education, vocational training, higher education, and other workforce development programs.*

To expand access to GED preparation classes and improve GED passing rates, there are certain key features of effective programs that should be supported and enhanced as part of a comprehensive approach to improving workforce development structures targeted to low-income populations in New York City. These programs must receive direct support and financial incentives to recruit those facing the greatest barriers to employment, including welfare recipients, disconnected youth, previously incarcerated, and immigrants. This is essential to stimulate economic growth and prepare the workforce needed to perform middle skill jobs that require more than a GED or high school diploma, but less than a four-year degree. It is also a critical means of creating new pathways out of poverty, which ultimately will reduce expenditures on public assistance and other public benefits. The “Bridge to College” program offered at Phipps Community Development Corporation (FPWA member agency) provides college advising services to students participating in GED classes administered by the NYC Department of Education (DOE) at their West Farms Technology and Career Center located in the Bronx. Key components that have led to student success rates include:<sup>3</sup>

- **Step-by-step explanations** of the college application process and requirements to enroll, with ongoing clear communication with students.
- **Intensive support services**, including:
  - GED preparation
  - Package on how to apply to many colleges and how to receive the maximum financial aid (with assistance in appealing initial decision)
  - Essay writing
  - SAT preparation
  - Full exploration of college options, with advice on how to get into the best college at the lowest cost with minimal students loans
  - Personal transition advisor who offers helpful academic and career guidance
- **Financial aid assistance**

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<sup>3</sup> Phipps Community Education Center (CEC), Bridge to College program at Phipps West Farms Technology and Career Center. More information available at: <http://www.phippswestfarms.org/index.php?name=collegebridge>.

- **College-focused GED instruction** – Transitional programs for students to be immediately placed into college preparation after they pass the GED. Students should have access to summer internships with stipends for living expenses if they get the GED months before they can apply/enroll in college. Students should be directed immediately into a program that is employment and/or education focused, so they do not lose momentum in getting into college.
- **GED teachers focus on promoting the goal of entering college.** Programs should be designed to eliminate the stigma of being a GED student and create a positive, supportive learning environment tailored to their needs. This learning environment should stimulate interest in school and open the possibility of going to college.

**5. Community-Based Organization (CBO) and Union Partnerships:** *Provide incentives for these partnerships that would include direct collaboration with adult education programs, community colleges, vocational training providers, and other social services agencies.*

In establishing these types of formal partnerships, more low-skill, low-income individuals would receive information and resources about how to access GED preparation classes that could prepare them to enter an apprenticeship or training program for a specific unionized industry. According to a report by the Center for Economic and Policy Research, “The Union Advantage for Low-Wage Workers,” union membership means getting a wage that is 16% higher than for non-unionized workers with similar education and other characteristics.<sup>4</sup> Given this significant union advantage, FPWA is currently working in collaboration with several organizations, including the Consortium for Worker Education (CWE), the largest education and training provider in New York City for both union and non-union workers, to expand these partnerships. However, the progress that can be made in this area is limited by the lack of funding. Therefore, we urge the City Council to make new investments to allow union representatives to act as liaisons to workforce development agencies serving disadvantaged populations. Since the GED certificate is often the minimum qualification to enter many apprenticeship and training programs that prepare workers for jobs in unionized industries, it is essential to offer low-income individuals the opportunity to learn about both GED preparation classes and pathways to unionized employment simultaneously. Furthermore, HRA clients should also receive information and resources that help them access information and

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<sup>4</sup> Schmitt, John (May 2008). “The Union Wage Advantage for Low-Wage Workers,” Center for Economic and Policy Research. Available at: [http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/quantile\\_2008\\_05.pdf](http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/quantile_2008_05.pdf).

resources about GED preparation classes offered throughout the City. Then, social services caseworkers could explain how clients can participate in these programs as part of their overall Employability Plan. In making this a regular part of the process that is conducted for all welfare recipients, we could break down barriers to education and develop the skilled workforce that will make New York competitive and revive the economy.

**6. GED-to-College Transitions:** *The City must support more of these programs to create smooth transitions between GED preparation classes, GED testing, and subsequent enrollment in post-secondary education or vocational training.*

The City must support more of these programs that expand access to college and vocational training programs for both youth and adults with limited skills and education. The current adult education system is largely disconnected from the higher education system, with a few exceptions. Both youth and adults who could benefit from GED-to-College transition programs often learn about the relatively small number of programs that currently exist by word of mouth, since there is no formal outreach mechanism to provide information about locally available programs and how to enroll. This is evidenced by the student stories presented earlier in this testimony. Key features of model GED-to-College Transition programs include:

- **Recruitment and Screening** – Students are recruited from a variety of community-based organizations and include youth and adults with skills deficits and/or a gap in their education that has left them ill-prepared for college. Direct outreach is conducted to community-based organizations, Workforce 1 Career Centers, Educational Opportunity Centers (EOCs), faith-based agencies, and public schools to extend information about college transition opportunities.
- **College-focused GED instruction** – Transitional programs for students to be immediately placed into college preparation after they pass the GED. Students should have access to summer internships with stipends for living expenses if they get the GED months before they can apply/enroll in college. Students should be directed immediately into a program that is employment and/or education focused.
- **Comprehensive curricula** for career planning, academic preparation, and college experience, including unique features to facilitate transition to college, such as:
  - Dual enrollment
  - Team teaching

- Student cohorts/Learning teams
- Peer mentoring to serve as a guide and role model of success
- Tutoring
- **Direct collaboration between adult education system and post-secondary institutions** in placement testing, planning recruitment activities, assistance with application procedures and financial aid planning through Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs).
- **Mandatory collaborative partnerships** with the local business community, community-based organizations, community colleges, adult education, high schools, and social services agencies.
- **Comprehensive services for students** to help them overcome barriers to success must be provided and institutionalized as supporting transition, including:
  - Address GED testing problems and barriers to access and successfully pass the GED.
  - Assistance with obtaining financial aid and covering cost of living expenses.
  - Full exploration of college options, with advice on balancing college reputation with expense.
  - Child care, transportation, housing, psychological counseling, and other wrap-around services needed to help students overcome barriers to success.
  - One-on-one academic and career guidance with full exploration of college options.
  - Ongoing case management to provide individualized services and support pre- and post-enrollment, transition, and matriculation in college.
- **Professional staff development** for administrators, teachers, and counselors to offer intensive training and teams to discuss teaching methods, outcomes, improving instruction, and co-teaching methods.

We strongly support the recommendation of the NYC Comptroller to establish the Mayor's Office for Skills Education to centralize and oversee all of the City's workforce development systems. It is essential to integrate GED preparation as part of this overall comprehensive cross-systems coordination between agencies. The major work of this new Office for Skills Education should include:

- **Fully aligning adult education with CUNY and SBS-administered workforce development programs.** The NYC Regional Adult Education Network (RAEN) and Mayor's Office of Adult Education should be directly involved in expanding collaborations between the adult education, higher education, and workforce development systems.

- **Supporting parallel GED and vocational training in specific high-demand industry sectors.** For those with literacy levels below 8<sup>th</sup> grade, it is likely that they will need six to nine months to attain their GED. To support their efforts, programs should offer GED preparation with parallel skills training in specific skill sectors. Such sectors should include: health care, technology and office operations, “green jobs” in construction, energy efficiency, and environmental remediation, and education. This ensures that individuals obtain an educational credential and career-focused skills simultaneously. The GED/Office Operations/Internship program at STRIVE (FPWA member agency) is piloting the parallel GED model, which offers clients the opportunity to acquire all three components essential to increase job qualifications: experience, skills, and education.
- **Expanding full immersion GED preparation programs that provide intensive GED training to shorten the amount of time for students to attain the GED.** These classes involve both traditional classroom instruction plus one-on-one tutoring in areas of weakness. Ideally, these classes should also infuse a college-focused approach that teaches students writing, reading, and researching skills needed to perform college-level work.
- **Conducting more direct outreach to individuals in low-income communities without a GED or high school diploma from GED preparation programs.** This should be conducted through community-based organizations, along with government agencies, including HRA, SBS, DOE, DYCD, and ACS.
- **Directly investing more resources into existing GED preparation programs** offered by DOE, CUNY, libraries, EOCs, the Consortium for Worker Education (CWE), and other community-based organizations.
- **Organizing and overseeing partnerships between Workforce 1 Career Centers, CUNY, EOCs, and other workforce development programs operated throughout the City.** The Mayor’s Office on Adult Education and RAEN should also play a leadership role in bridging these agencies to support a comprehensive approach to workforce development. In working in direct collaboration, these agencies could design a clear career roadmap in specific sectors that demonstrates a pathway from low literacy (below 8<sup>th</sup> grade) through the process of increasing literacy and math skills, preparing for and passing the GED exam, and enrolling in postsecondary education, training, or apprenticeship program. This roadmap should also include various employment opportunities along the way in specific industries for individuals depending upon their unique career interests and pace in acquiring new skills that have value in the labor market.

In conclusion, we strongly support the recommendations presented in “Our Chance for Change.” We urge the City Council to recognize the urgency of improving the GED testing system and support a comprehensive solution to these problems by restructuring the City’s workforce development systems.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony today.