

Characteristics of high school equivalency exams and the students who take them in New Jersey



What are high school equivalency exams?

High school equivalency exams are tests which students who do not finish high school can take to demonstrate their skills and knowledge and earn a high school equivalency credential. These credentials can open the doors to postsecondary education and employment opportunities. For instance, students who have this credential can receive federal financial aid to attend a postsecondary institution or to participate in training programs.¹

The U.S. Department of Education recognizes these three exams as equivalent to a high school diploma:²

GED

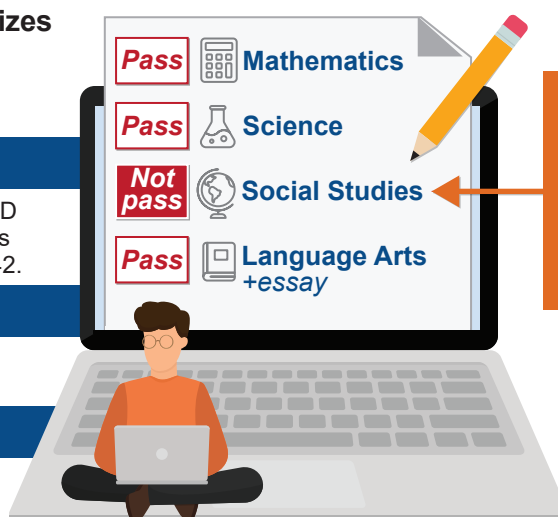
The GED is a new test introduced in 2014 by the GED Testing service, which previously developed the Tests of General Educational Development used since 1942.

HISET

High School Equivalency Test, developed by Educational Testing Service

TASC

Test Assessing Secondary Completion, developed by CTB/McGraw-Hill



For all three exams, test takers must pass each of several subjects (*Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, and Language Arts including an essay*) to successfully complete the overall exam and can retake any individual subject on a later date if they fail on their first attempt.

The test developers suggest a passing score, but states may set their own passing score. The GED and HiSET also include a higher score indicating college and career readiness.³

This infographic shares findings from [a REL Mid-Atlantic study](#) that investigated characteristics of high school equivalency exams in New Jersey and the students who take them. States considering changing the tests they offer or the passing scores for these tests can use this information to understand how these exams compare.

High school equivalency exams in New Jersey

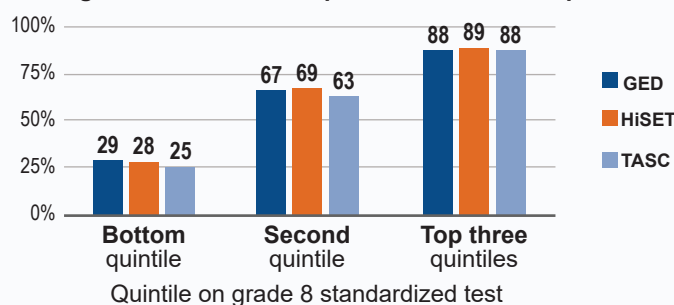
REL Mid-Atlantic examined the characteristics of test takers in New Jersey who had been enrolled in grade 8 in New Jersey public schools from 2008/09 to 2013/14 and took a high school equivalency exam from March 2014 to December 2018.



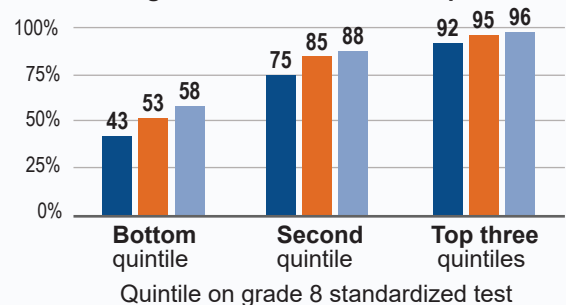
Test takers with comparable grade 8 standardized test scores were similarly likely to pass each of the three exams, suggesting that the exams are similar in their level of difficulty. The typical test taker in New Jersey was in the second quintile of the statewide grade 8 test score distribution (between the 20th and 40th percentiles), and 63 to 69 percent of these test takers passed the high school equivalency exam on their first attempt (figure 1).

Figure 1. Test takers with comparable grade 8 standardized test scores were similarly likely to pass each of the three high school equivalency exams

Percentage of test takers who passed on first attempt



Percentage of test takers who ever passed



HiSET is High School Equivalency Test. TASC is Test Assessing Secondary Completion.

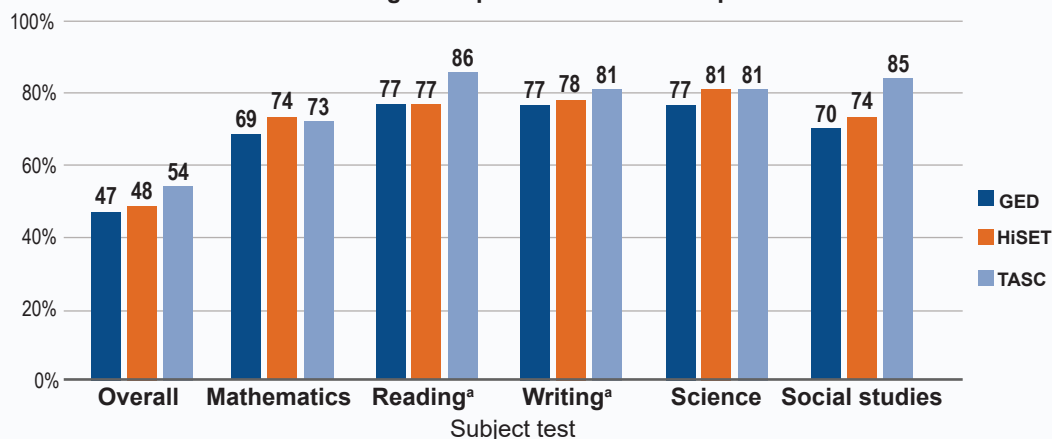
Note: The grade 8 standardized test is the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge. This figure includes high school equivalency (HSE) test takers enrolled in grade 8 in a New Jersey public school from 2008/09 to 2013/14, and who took an HSE exam from March 2014 to December 2018. Forty-one percent of HSE takers are in the bottom quintile, 30 percent are in the second quintile, and 30 percent are in the top three quintiles. HSE takers are considered to have passed each HSE exam if their score exceeded developers' passing scores.

Source: Grade 8 New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge scores come from the New Jersey Department of Education's longitudinal K-12 information system (NJ SMART), and test performance comes from HSE testing vendors (collected by the New Jersey Department of Education).

For all three exams, test takers were least likely to pass the math subject test on the first attempt (figure 2). For the HiSET and GED, few reached the threshold set by developers indicating college and career readiness.

Figure 2. Passing rates were lowest for the math subject test on all three high school equivalency exams

Percentage who passed on first attempt



HiSET is High School Equivalency Test. TASC is Test Assessing Secondary Completion.

Note: This figure includes high school equivalency (HSE) test takers enrolled in grade 8 in a New Jersey public school from 2008/09 to 2013/14, and who took an HSE exam from March 2014 to December 2018. HSE takers are considered to have passed each HSE exam if their score exceeded developers' passing scores.

a. The GED only reports a single language arts score and does not report separate scores for reading and writing. In this figure, the reading and writing passing rates for the GED are set equal to the language arts passing rate. HiSET and TASC report separate scores by reading and writing.

Source: Test performance comes from HSE testing vendors (collected by the New Jersey Department of Education).

Key takeaways

The three exams are similar across many dimensions, including passing rates. Most students who scored above the 20th percentile on the grade 8 standardized test in New Jersey passed the high school equivalency exam of their choice, with higher grade 8 test scores reflecting a greater likelihood of passing the exams. For states considering changing the tests they offer, the three tests provide similar alternatives to receiving a high school equivalency credential for students who had been enrolled in the public school system in the past 10 years.

Characteristics of New Jersey high-school equivalency test takers



Most took the **TASC** (rather than the GED or HiSET)



Most were likely to be **eligible for the national school lunch program** (an indicator of economic disadvantage)



Most identified as **Black or Hispanic**

Features of high-school equivalency exams

	GED	HiSET	TASC
Number of states that offer each exam ⁴	42	22	14
Mode of administration ⁵	Computer-based only	Computer-based or paper and pencil	Computer-based or paper and pencil
Languages and formats ⁶	English, Spanish, braille, and audio	English, Spanish, braille, and audio	English, Spanish, braille, and audio
Out-of-pocket costs for the first attempt in New Jersey ⁷	\$120.00	\$103.75	\$114.00
Typical length ⁸	7 hours 25 minutes	7 hours 5 minutes	7 hours 45 minutes
Current passing score for each subject test in New Jersey	145	8	500

Endnotes

¹ U.S. Department of Education. (2021). *Federal Student Aid handbook*. <https://fsapartners.ed.gov/sites/default/files/attachments/2020-07/2021FSAHbkVol1Master.pdf>

² U.S. Department of Education. (2014, April 11). *Recognized equivalent of a high school diploma* [Memo]. <https://fsapartners.ed.gov/sites/default/files/attachments/dpccletters/GEN1406.pdf>

³ Shaffer, B. (2015). *The changing landscape of high school equivalency in the U.S.: Options, issues, and improvement strategies*. Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success. <https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/changing-landscape-high-school-equivalency-us-options-issues-and>

⁴ CareerOneStop. (n.d.). *State high school equivalency options*. Retrieved May 4, 2021, from <https://www.careeronestop.org/FindTraining/Types/State-HSE-Options.aspx>

⁵ Shaffer (2015).

⁶ Zinth, J. (2015). *GED, HiSET, and TASC test: A comparison of high school equivalency assessments*. Education Commission of the States. <https://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/20/38/12038.pdf>

⁷ New Jersey Adult Education. *Test centers*. Retrieved December 17, 2020, from <https://www.nj.gov/education/adulted/centers/>

⁸ Zinth (2015).