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GED, HiSET and TASC Test: A comparison of high school equivalency assessments

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Until January 2014, the General Educational Development (GED) was the only option for youth and adults lacking a high school diploma, but needing a high school credential to pursue employment opportunities or postsecondary education. However, in January 2014, some states began administering one or both alternatives to the GED – the Educational Testing Service (ETS) HiSET and the Data Recognition Corporation/CTB TASC Test Assessing Secondary Completion.

This Education Commission of the States trends report provides a comparison of these three assessments' features, aspects of testing programs states have weighed when deciding which high school equivalency exam to offer and the decisionmaking process states have used to select one or more alternatives to the GED.

States cite common multiple factors in decisions to offer the HiSET and TASC test, including assessment costs, testing center infrastructure and staff capacity, and test-taker ability to complete a computer-based test.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

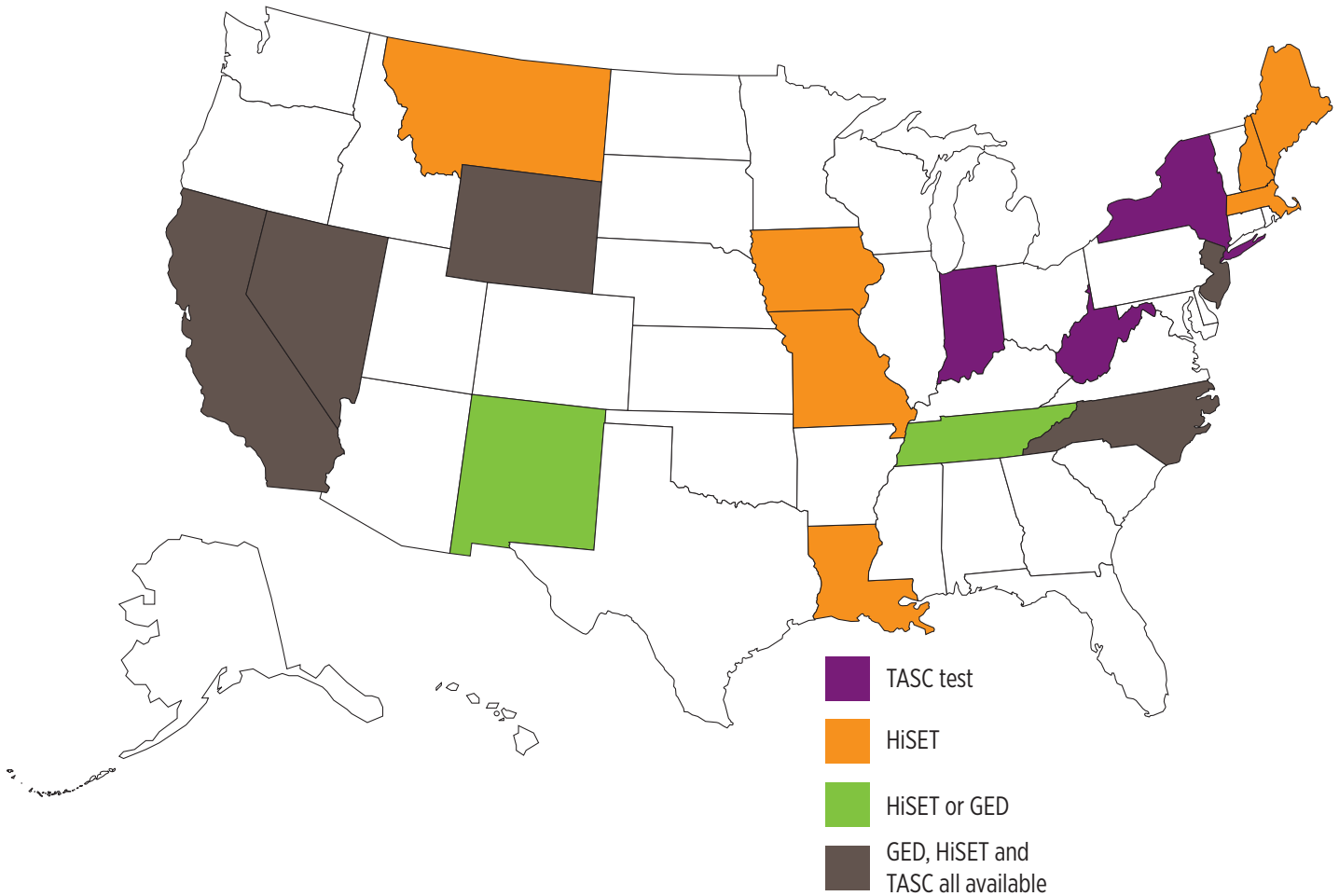
Seventeen states are offering the HiSET and/or TASC test in addition to or in lieu of the GED.

The GED, HiSET and TASC test vary in length, item type, formats available and cost.

States have generally been using a request for proposal or related selection and procurement process to select vendors for high school equivalency exams.

Which states are currently offering which assessments?

Seventeen states are currently offering the HiSET and/or TASC test in addition to or in lieu of the GED.



TASC test: **Indiana, New York, West Virginia**

HiSET: **Iowa, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire**

HiSET or GED: **New Mexico, Tennessee** (will be offering only HiSET effective 2016)

GED, HiSET and TASC all available: **California, Nevada, New Jersey, North Carolina, Wyoming**

Illinois and South Carolina, which currently offer only the GED, will be offering both the TASC test and GED at a later date (to be determined).

How different are the three assessments?

As the table below indicates, the assessments vary in length, item type, formats available and cost.

	GED	TASC test	HiSET
Developer	GED Testing Service	Data Recognition Corporation/CTB	Educational Testing Service
Test Sections	<p>Reasoning through Language Arts: 150 minutes, including multiple choice, short answer, several types of technology-enhanced items, drop-down items embedded in passages and 45-minute extended response item.</p> <p>Mathematical Reasoning: 115 minutes, including multiple choice, a variety of technology-enhanced item types and drop-down items.</p> <p>Science: 90 minutes, including multiple choice, short answer, a variety of technology-enhanced item types and drop-down items.</p> <p>Social Studies: 90 minutes, including multiple choice, short answer, a variety of technology-enhanced item types and drop-down items.¹</p> <p>While the “GED Testing Service is not specifying the total numbers of each item type on the 2014 GED test ... more than 50 percent of the items on each test form will be multiple choice.”²</p>	<p>Reading Literacy: 75 minutes, 48-49 multiple choice items, one constructed-response item, one technology-enhanced item (for computer-based tests), up to eight passages.</p> <p>Writing: 105 minutes, including 45 minutes for essay writing, 50-51 multiple choice items, one constructed-response item, one technology-enhanced item (for computer-based tests), one writing prompt based on two passages.</p> <p>Math: 105 minutes, 42-43 multiple-choice items, 11 gridded response items (fill in the blank with bubble grid where numeric answers are filled in), one constructed-response item, one technology-enhanced item (for computer-based tests).</p> <p>Science: 85 minutes, 48-49 multiple-choice items, one constructed-response item, one technology-enhanced item (for computer-based tests), eight stimuli.</p> <p>Social Studies: 75 minutes, 48-49 multiple-choice items, one constructed-response item, one technology-enhanced item (for computer-based tests).³</p>	<p>Language Arts–Reading: 65 minutes, 40 multiple choice questions.</p> <p>Language Arts–Writing: Total: 120 minutes. Part I: 75 minutes, 50 multiple-choice questions; Part II: 45 minutes, one essay question.</p> <p>Mathematics: 90 minutes, 50 multiple-choice questions.</p> <p>Science: 80 minutes, 50 multiple-choice questions.</p> <p>Social Studies: 70 minutes, 50 multiple-choice questions.⁴</p>
Total time	7 hours, 25 minutes	7 hours, 45 minutes	7 hours, 5 minutes
Formats available	<p>Available in Spanish as well as braille. Blind students not proficient in braille will have the test read to them via screen-reader technology. All test-takers will be able to adjust font size on screen.⁵ Other accommodations available.</p> <p>Available in computer-based format only (no paper-based option available).</p>	<p>Available in Spanish as well as braille, large-print and audio versions. Other accommodations available.</p> <p>Available in computer-based and paper-based formats.</p>	<p>Available in Spanish as well as braille, large-print and audio versions (large print and audio for paper-based test-takers only; screen magnification available on computer-based test).⁶ Other accommodations available.</p> <p>Available in computer-based and paper-based formats.</p>

	GED	TASC test	HiSET
Developer	GED Testing Service	Data Recognition Corporation/CTB	Educational Testing Service
Base cost of full battery set by vendor (excluding administration/test center/other fees)	\$80	\$52	\$50
Cost to test taker for full battery (including fees)	<p>In 17 states, \$120. This includes \$80 base price plus \$40 standard test center compensation. The following eight states and DC either offer a subsidy or have negotiated with testing centers a lower standard test center compensation, so the actual cost to the test-taker is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AR: \$16.⁷ • CT: \$13, which includes the cost of the diploma. Veterans and test-takers under age 21 are exempt from this fee.⁸ • DC: \$15.⁸ • MD: \$45.¹⁰ • MN: \$80.¹¹ • NV: \$95.¹² • NM: \$80.¹³ • NC: \$80.¹⁴ • OH: \$40-\$120.¹⁵ <p>In Michigan, no official state prices for taking the GED are set. Prices set by testing centers.¹⁶</p> <p>In 13 states, the cost for the full battery for first-time test-takers exceeds \$120. This is due to additional state fees included. The full battery in these states ranges from \$128 in Florida to \$160 in Georgia.¹⁷</p>	<p>Due to subsidies or other arrangements, the cost charged to test-takers varies by state:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CA: Costs vary by test center.¹⁸ • IN: Costs vary by test center, but do not exceed \$90.¹⁹ • NV: \$65.²⁰ • NJ: Costs vary by test center, but do not exceed \$92.²¹ • NY: \$0.²² • NC: \$52.²³ • WV: \$0.²⁴ • WY: Costs vary by test center but do not exceed \$72.²⁵ 	<p>\$50. Cost charged to test-takers varies by state:</p> <p>CA: Test centers set their own fees for the battery. Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) charges \$150 for battery.²⁶</p> <p>IA: \$50.²⁷</p> <p>LA: \$90.²⁸</p> <p>ME: Resident: No charge. Non-resident: \$150 for battery, \$45 per test.²⁹</p> <p>MA: \$100 per battery, \$9 per test retake.³⁰</p> <p>MO: \$95.³¹</p> <p>MT: \$50. Test centers may charge an additional fee of up to \$15. Fee for test retakes set by individual testing centers but do not exceed \$6 per test.³²</p> <p>NV: \$65.³³</p> <p>NH: \$95.³⁴</p> <p>NJ: \$90.³⁵</p> <p>NM: \$50 per battery, \$15 per test retake.³⁶</p> <p>NC: \$50.³⁷</p> <p>TN: \$75.³⁸</p> <p>WY: \$50. Test centers may charge an additional fee.³⁹</p>

State considerations when choosing tests

Conversations with agency staff, state agency documents and news coverage in the popular media all point to common reasons states have weighed in determinations on which high school equivalency test to offer. These include:

- ◆ **Increased cost of GED:** Effective January 2014, the cost of taking all four tests in the GED battery increased to \$120. Some state agency staff raised concerns that this cost may be prohibitively expensive to some prospective GED test-takers, who, lacking a high school credential, are more likely to be low-income.
- ◆ **Full versus incremental alignment to Common Core State Standards:** The GED is currently aligned to Common Core State Standards and other rigorous standards in science and social studies, while the TASC test and HiSET are scaling up to full alignment with Common Core State Standards. In deliberations about which high school equivalency exam to offer, Iowa decision-makers noted that if an assessment were truly to be a high school equivalency assessment, and the K-12 education system is not fully aligned to Common Core State Standards until 2017, it follows that the state’s high school equivalency assessment should not be fully aligned to Common Core State Standards until 2017.

- ◆ **Concerns about testing center infrastructure and staff capacity:** Ensuring that testing centers statewide have the necessary infrastructure and staff training to offer high school equivalency tests solely in a computer-based format may pose substantial financial and logistical challenges in some states. According to a February 2015 New York State Education Department **document**, some 86 percent of testing centers in the state lack the technical expertise or infrastructure to accommodate computer-based testing. To address this challenge, New York piloted the online TASC test at 13 sites in 2014, and permits up to 40 percent of 2015 tests and 60 percent of 2016 tests to be administered on computer. The paper-based version will be available at all 269 testing centers approved by the State Education Department.⁴⁰

Massachusetts was concerned about the accessibility of computer-based versions for corrections populations in particular. Meanwhile, in Wyoming, where GED, HiSET and TASC test are all administered, agency staff noted some testing centers do not have the capacity to offer all the assessment options.

- ◆ **Test-taker ability to complete a computer-based test:** State agency staff in multiple states commented that beyond infrastructure issues, some test-takers have little to no familiarity with computer-based testing, making an exclusively computer-based testing platform an unviable option. For example, in New Hampshire, which offers the HiSET in both paper-based and computer-based formats, 85 percent of test-takers are self-selecting into the paper-based HiSET.
- ◆ **Ability to combine GED and HiSET scores in 2014:** In 2014 only, ETS permitted states to allow pre-2014 GED subtest scores to be combined with HiSET subtest scores to award a state high school equivalency diploma or certificate.⁴¹ Montana and Wyoming agency staff cited this as one factor supporting state adoption of the HiSET in 2014. Wyoming agency staff reported that HiSET advised the 2015 HiSET “had lost sufficient correlation [to] the original 2002 [GED] series to continue the practice with defensible validity.”⁴²

Potential workarounds for offering multiple assessments in multiple formats

In Wyoming a testing center is not required to offer all three of the approved assessments. However, whenever possible, another delivery provider in the same community will be sourced to offer the missing services when a current provider is unwilling to cover the service gap. Wyoming agency staff note the driving force is and will remain student preference and perceived need.⁴³

To allow for a gradual transition to multiple testing options and testing platforms, New Mexico testing centers currently may offer GED or HiSET, but must offer both assessments in 2016 and 2017. To fulfill this requirement, testing centers may choose to offer GED for computer-based testing and HiSET for paper-based testing, or may offer both exams via computer-based testing only.

Do states cite benefits to offering all three assessments?

California chose to offer all three assessments to allow for student choice and overcome infrastructure issues related to a fully computer-based testing platform. Some testing sites in California were unable to transition to computer-based testing in 2014. Offering all three assessments provides test-takers with access to the GED with potentially greater name recognition among test-takers, but provides cost and testing format alternatives to the GED.

Troy Tallabas, the high school equivalency certification program manager for the Wyoming Community College System, notes that just as students have different learning styles, they also have different assessment preferences. Students who have never been exposed to instruction aligned to the Common Core State Standards will struggle to know how to answer assessment items based on the Common Core State Standards and may not achieve success on those assessments. The practice of offering a monolithic assessment program begs the question, “Are you fully accommodating that student’s learning needs if you are not offering all the assessment options available?”

Decisionmaking process and who is involved

To determine which high school equivalency exam will be offered, states have generally launched a competitive bid or review process by issuing a request for proposals (RFP) or request for applications (RFA). RFP or RFA has been the process in such states as Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Maine, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina and West Virginia. In multiple states, state agency staff commented that the RFP process is necessary for procurement regardless of whether the item to be contracted for is an assessment, or some other product or

service. The vendor selected through the RFP process is then awarded a single- or multi-year contract to offer the high school equivalency exam in the state. Alternatively, Massachusetts issued a request for responses (RFR), Montana, Nevada, New York and Wyoming released a request for information (RFI), while New Jersey used a request for qualifications (RFQ).

In virtually every state that has adopted the HiSET or TASC test, the state department of education has led the RFP/RFR/RFI/RFQ process. Exceptions to this include Indiana, where the RFP was issued by the Department of Workforce Development and community college system, and North Carolina and Wyoming, where the RFP and RFI processes, respectively, were led by the community college system. Across states, the process typically entails obtaining state agency or state board approval to launch an RFP/RFA/RFI process, creating a committee of agency staff and other stakeholders to review and rate proposals submitted by the vendors and presenting recommendations to a designated individual or entity who makes the final vendor selection (for example, the state agency head overseeing adult education programs, the state board or state superintendent).

Variations on this process include:

- ◆ **Legislation/state agency process:** In Tennessee, the process appears to have been launched by the legislature rather than state agency staff or a state board. A bill, 2012 H.B. 2861, directed the Department of Labor and Workforce Development, with the assistance of the Department of Education, the State Board of Education and Higher Education Commission to develop and implement a program offering a means other than the GED for individuals to earn a high school equivalency credential. An interim report from the Department of Labor and Workforce Development with legislation recommendations was due in February 2013. The 2013 Lois M. DeBerry Alternative Diploma Act subsequently authorized the Department of Labor and Workforce Development to make recommendations on assessments leading to the award of a high school equivalency credential. The recommendations were to be reviewed by the State Board of Education; any recommendation approved by the Board must be considered a high school equivalency assessment.
- ◆ **MOU agreement with all vendors:** The California Department of Education has signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) agreement by calendar year with each of the three assessment vendors. (State does not have contract with the three vendors.)

ENDNOTES

- 1 GED Testing Service, *Assessment Guide for Educators* (July 2014), <http://www.gedtestingservice.com/uploads/files/8c13f2e71e85447c9c4caff12b4cf943.pdf> (accessed April 28, 2015).
- 2 GED Testing Service, “Programs and Services FAQs: Item Types and Item Samplers” (n.d.), <http://www.gedtestingservice.com/educators/2014-faqs#item> (accessed April 28, 2015).
- 3 CTB McGraw Hill, *TASC Test Objective Structure* (n.d.), http://ctbassessments.com/pdfs/TASC_ObjectiveStructure.pdf (accessed April 28, 2015).
- 4 Educational Testing Service (ETS), “HiSET Test Content” (n.d.), <http://hiset.ets.org/about/content> (accessed April 28, 2015).
- 5 GED Testing Service, “Programs and Services FAQs: Accommodations” (n.d.), <http://www.gedtestingservice.com/educators/2014-faqs#accomm> (accessed April 28, 2015).
- 6 *HiSET Test Taker Bulletin 2014*, (2013), http://hiset.ets.org/s/pdf/test_taker_bulletin.pdf (accessed April 28, 2015).
- 7 http://www.gedtestingservice.com/testers/policy_ar#price.
- 8 <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2620&q=335258>.
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- 15 <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Testing/GED/GED-FAQs#FAQ232>.

- 16 <http://www.michigan.gov/fyit/0,4585,7-240-44289-160375--,00.html>.
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- 18 <https://california.tasctest.com>.
- 19 <https://indiana.tasctest.com>.
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- 23 <http://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/college-and-career-readiness/high-school-equivalency>.
- 24 <https://westvirginia.tasctest.com>.
- 25 https://docs.google.com/a/ecs.org/spreadsheets/d/1o8v4WVfcwdbGSIYLd6bgr_HUq_QZ35ZMU_nK5D1UIhs/pub?output=html. ; email communication with Troy Tallabas, July 16, 2015.
- 26 California test centers set their own fees for the battery. Contact a test center for details. <http://hiset.ets.org/requirements/ca>; also see: <http://achieve.lausd.net/hsetestcenter>.
- 27 Includes two retests per test during 12-month period from initial date of purchase (<http://hiset.ets.org/requirements/ia>).
- 28 \$50 annual ETS exam battery fee, \$30 test center fee, and \$10 annual state administration fee (<http://hiset.ets.org/requirements/la>).
- 29 \$150 battery fee for Maine non-residents includes \$50 ETS exam battery fee and \$100 state administration fee; \$45 per test fee includes \$15 ETS fee and \$30 state administration fee (<http://hiset.ets.org/requirements/me>).
- 30 Test-takers are charged \$64 when scheduling first test; remaining \$36 is charged as other 4 tests are scheduled (\$9 per test x 4 = 36) (<http://hiset.ets.org/requirements/ma>).
- 31 \$50 ETS fee, \$10 Missouri State Department of Education administration fee, \$35 test center administration fee (<http://hiset.ets.org/requirements/mo>).
- 32 \$50 fee and up to \$15 test center administration fee (<http://hiset.ets.org/requirements/mt>).
- 33 \$50 ETS fee and \$15 test center administration fee (<http://hiset.ets.org/requirements/nv>).
- 34 \$50 ETS fee, \$35 test center administration fee, and \$10 state administration fee (<http://hiset.ets.org/requirements/nh>).
- 35 \$50 ETS fee and \$40 test center fee (<http://hiset.ets.org/requirements/nj>).
- 36 \$50 for all five tests if paid up-front, and two free retakes (<http://hiset.ets.org/requirements/nm>).
- 37 \$50 per battery (five subtests); \$15 per subtest (<http://hiset.ets.org/requirements/nc>).
- 38 \$50 ETS fee and \$25 test center administration fee (<http://hiset.ets.org/requirements/tn>).
- 39 <http://hiset.ets.org/requirements/wy>.
- 40 New York State Education Department, *Guidance Counselor Fact Sheet on TASC* (n.d.), <http://www.acces.nysed.gov/ged/documents/GUIDANCECOUNSELORFACTSHEETONTASC.pdf> (accessed April 28, 2015).
- 41 ETS, *Frequently Asked Questions – HiSET Program Administration* (2015), http://hiset.ets.org/s/pdf/program_admin_faq.pdf (accessed April 29, 2015).
- 42 Troy Tallabas, Wyoming Community College Commission, email communication, April 30, 2015.
- 43 Ibid.

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