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# Adult High School Diploma Attainment in Baltimore: Status, Consequences, Opportunities, and Recommendations


By Martha Holleman

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F O U N D A T I O N  
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# Adult High School Diploma Attainment in Baltimore: Status, Consequences, Opportunities, and Recommendations

by Martha Holleman

## Executive Summary

An estimated 81,000 Baltimore City adults (age 18 and over) are lacking a high school diploma—the absence of which leaves them at a considerable disadvantage in the current economy and is correlated with a host of other poor outcomes for individuals, their families, and the broader community.

The lack of a high school diploma both reflects and exacerbates some of the most severe inequities in our society. According to the U.S. Census American Community Survey, those with a high school diploma or its equivalent in Baltimore earn about \$7,000 more a year than those without one (an estimated \$28,396 versus \$21,359). The lack of a high school credential restricts opportunities for further education and training—that is, access to the sort of postsecondary career training required for competitiveness in pursuing the region's middle-skill jobs. There is a correlation between not having a high school diploma and lower employment rates and higher rates of teen pregnancy and incarceration. The absence of a diploma exerts a cost on society in terms of lower tax revenue and higher costs of social services.

Adults can earn a high school diploma in Maryland by graduating from a recognized educational institution, such as a public or private high school; by passing the GED test; or by participating in the National External Diploma Program (NEDP).

Baltimore City Public Schools (City Schools), The Mayor's Office of Employment Development (MOED), and the Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation (DLLR) currently manage and fund the majority of efforts that are intended to lead to the receipt of a high school diploma. This report identified 48 community-based programs that offer adult and computer literacy classes, GED preparation, and other educational services and supports.

Thousands of Baltimore City residents enroll in adult education programs. Hundreds of City Schools' students persist in a fifth year beyond their expected four-year graduation date. Hundreds more participate in MOED's Youth Opportunity (YO) Program. Yet, few city residents actually gain a diploma through these alternative means. Though at best a guess, estimates from the data currently available indicate that an additional 370 Maryland high school diplomas are granted to city residents in a year.

Amid these challenges, however, is a growing recognition of the problem and an increasing desire to do something about it. Efforts include two new adult high schools set to launch in Baltimore and multiple programs reimagining the connection between adult education and occupational skills training.

The report offers the following recommendations:

- Mayor Pugh and the Baltimore City Council should move immediately to re-establish a leadership body dedicated to adult education and training and provide local funds to increase the number of adult residents with a high school diploma.
- Current adult education programs and their funders should ask themselves hard questions about the results documented in this paper and be willing to act differently to accelerate high school diploma receipt.
- While continuing a system-wide focus on improving literacy that will hopefully result in greater diploma attainment and post-secondary success over the long term, the leadership of Baltimore City Public Schools should move with urgency to put a priority emphasis on the return of young people ages 18-21 who have left school without graduating.
- The Mayor's Office of Employment Development should also move with urgency to complete a review and restructuring of its YO Program to increase attendance, educational attainment, employment, and earnings among participants.
- The Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation should explore alternative pathways to a high school diploma.
- Agencies, programs, and funders should closely monitor and advocate for the continued development, implementation and funding of adult high schools in Baltimore and Maryland, and they should demand increased accountability for performance of all efforts to promote high school attainment.

## Introduction

The Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce estimates that by 2020, 69 percent of the jobs in Maryland will require some training beyond high school<sup>1</sup>—making a high school diploma a necessary, but not sufficient, credential for most employment opportunities throughout the state and region.

Yet, 30-plus years of poorly performing public educational institutions and high drop-out rates—that are only now beginning to improve—have led to low levels of high school diploma attainment in Baltimore City, putting nearly 81,000 residents in a precarious position with respect to their employment.

Given the stakes, this paper seeks to:

- Shed light on the current status, consequences, and costs of the lack of a high school diploma in Baltimore;
- Provide a summary of existing efforts to support adult learners in their attempt to gain a high school diploma—and what is known about high school diploma receipt as a result;
- Highlight emerging opportunities to accelerate adult high school program completion; and
- Surface a set of recommendations for broader consideration and action.

It is not intended as an evaluation or assessment of individual adult education and alternative high school completion programs in Baltimore. Rather, this paper is a city-level exploration of the challenges faced by city residents who do not have a high school diploma, the results of current efforts, and what else might be done. It began in 2015 as an internal briefing memo for the Abell Foundation in support of the foundation's efforts to advance the employment and earnings of city residents. Since then, it has been greatly strengthened and updated with

current administrative data provided by the Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation (DLLR) and the Mayor's Office of Employment Development (MOED); alongside the insightful suggestions and comments of key informants and independent reviewers.

While expanded in scope and strengthened by additional data and external review, this paper is still, at best, a cursory look. It does not directly address low levels of literacy and numeracy among high school graduates—a related and equally challenging constraint facing adult job seekers in Baltimore. Nor does it offer any silver bullet. It is, after all, only a first step intended to shed light on—and bring urgency to—the challenge of adult high school diploma attainment.

It is also offered, as one thoughtful reviewer cautioned, with some trepidation. Many programs, professionals, and committed volunteers are working with great dedication to provide adult education services in Baltimore. The outcomes documented here in no way should be taken as a blanket condemnation or critique of existing efforts. Instead, one hopes that current results lead us to ask: What else can we do?

The lack of a high school diploma constrains economic opportunity and curtails life chances. The question is: What is Baltimore willing to do about it?

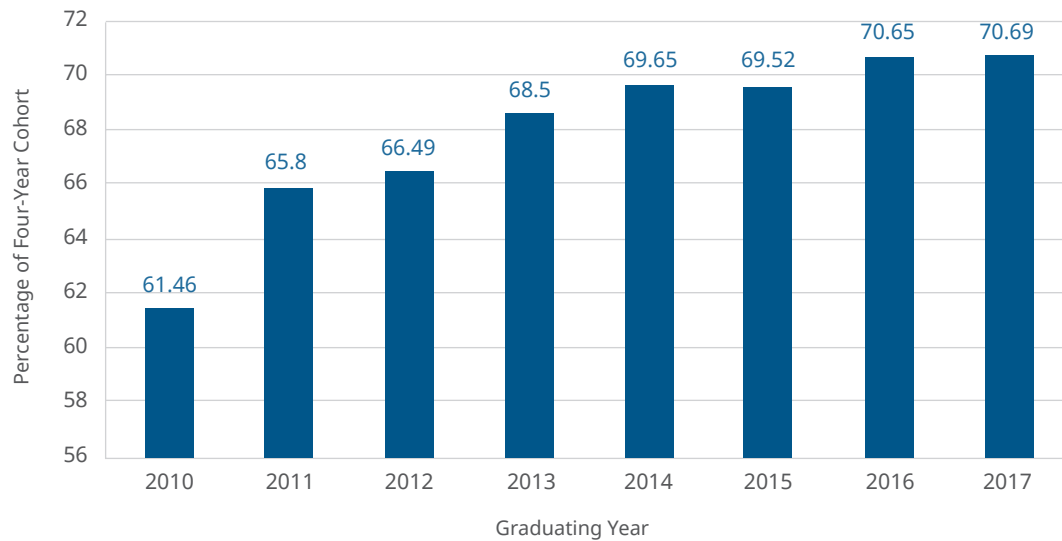
## I. Current Status, Consequences, and Costs

### Status

The good news is that the high school graduation rate from Baltimore City Public Schools is improving. Between 2010 and 2017, the graduation rate increased by 9 percentage points.<sup>2</sup>

In more good news, the percentage of Baltimore City residents ages 25-64 without a high school diploma or its equivalency is

Figure 1. Baltimore City Public Schools Graduation Rates by Year:  
Four-Year Adjusted Cohorts, 2010 – 2017



Source: Four-year adjusted cohort graduation rates, Maryland Report Card, 2017

Table 1. Baltimore City Residents (Age 18 and Over)  
Without a High School Diploma or Equivalent

Subgroup	Estimated Number Without a High School Diploma or Equivalent
Residents ages 18-24	10,929
Residents age 25 and over	69,839
<b>Total</b>	<b>80,768</b>

Source: U.S. Census, American Community Survey, five-year estimates (2012-2016)

also dropping. According to the U.S. Census American Community Survey, in 2010, 23 percent of adults over the age of 25 were estimated to be without a high school diploma. By 2017, the estimated percentage of adults who did not graduate from high school had fallen to 16 percent of the adult population.<sup>3</sup>

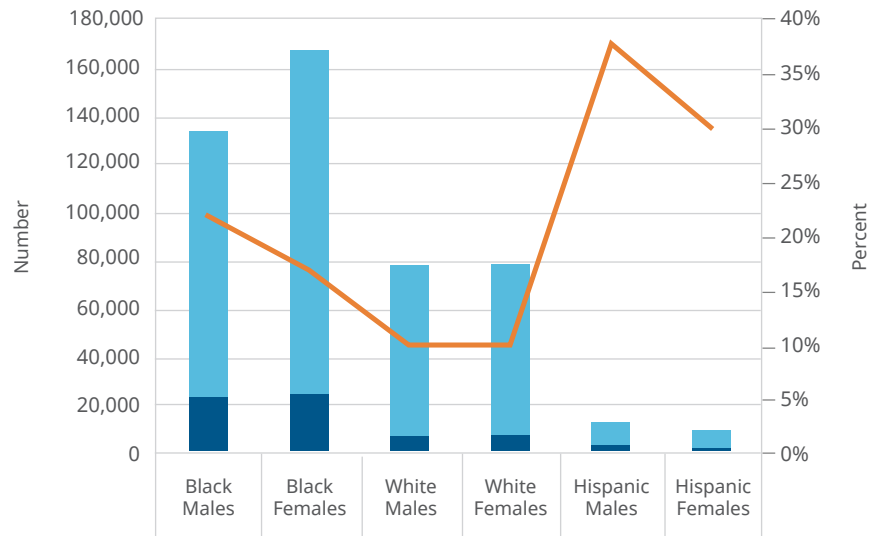
While improving, high school diploma attainment in the city lags its neighbors to the north and south. In Baltimore City, 16 percent of adult residents do not have a high school diploma. In Baltimore County, 9 percent of the adult population does not have a diploma. In Howard County, 5 percent do not.




The bad news is that an estimated 80,768 Baltimore City adults (age 18 and over) are

without a high school diploma—the absence of which leaves them at a considerable disadvantage in the current economy and is correlated with a host of other poor outcomes for individuals and their families.

Given the history of severely constrained opportunities for African-Americans in Baltimore,<sup>4</sup> along with more recent patterns of immigration from Central America, even in our majority minority city, averages mask stark differences in educational attainment between residents.<sup>5</sup> The demographic groups with the highest percentages of those without a high school diploma are Hispanic men and women; the highest numbers of those without a diploma are African-American men and women.

**Figure 2. High School Diploma Attainment by Race and Gender: Baltimore City Population Estimates, Age 25 and Over**



	Est. number age 25 and over	110,537	143,788	70,898	71,855	9,267	7,379
	Est. number without a High School Diploma	23,890	24,622	7,253	7,386	3,483	2,199
	Est. percentage without a High School Diploma	22%	17%	10%	10%	38%	30%

Source: U.S. Census, American Community Survey, five-year estimates (2012-2016); analysis by author



**Consequences**

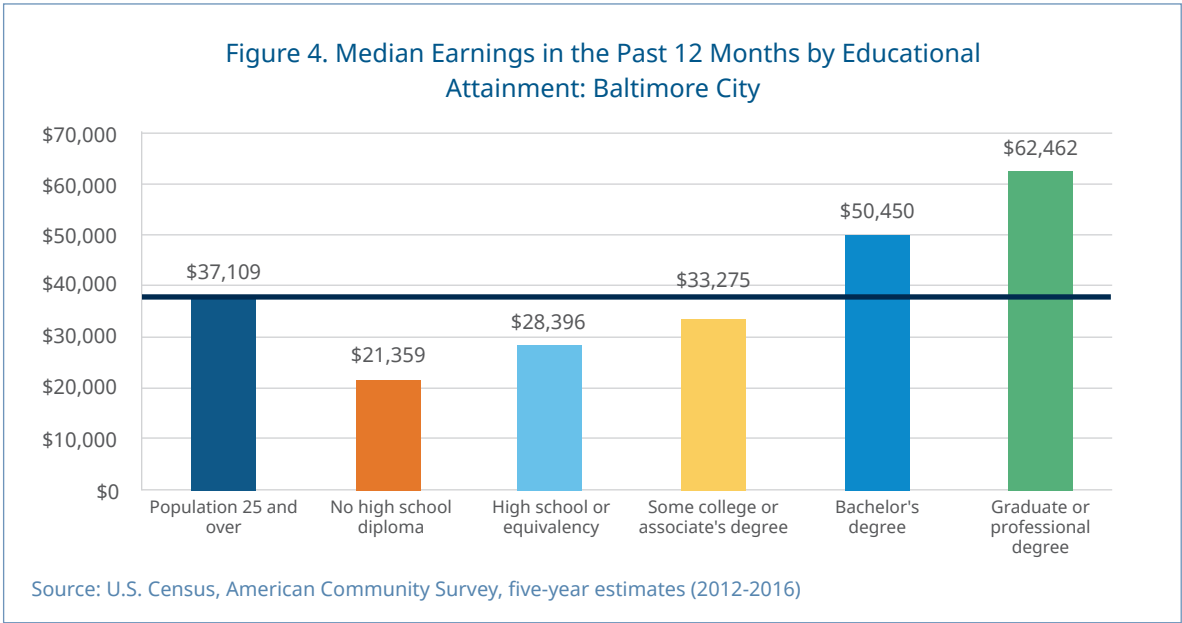
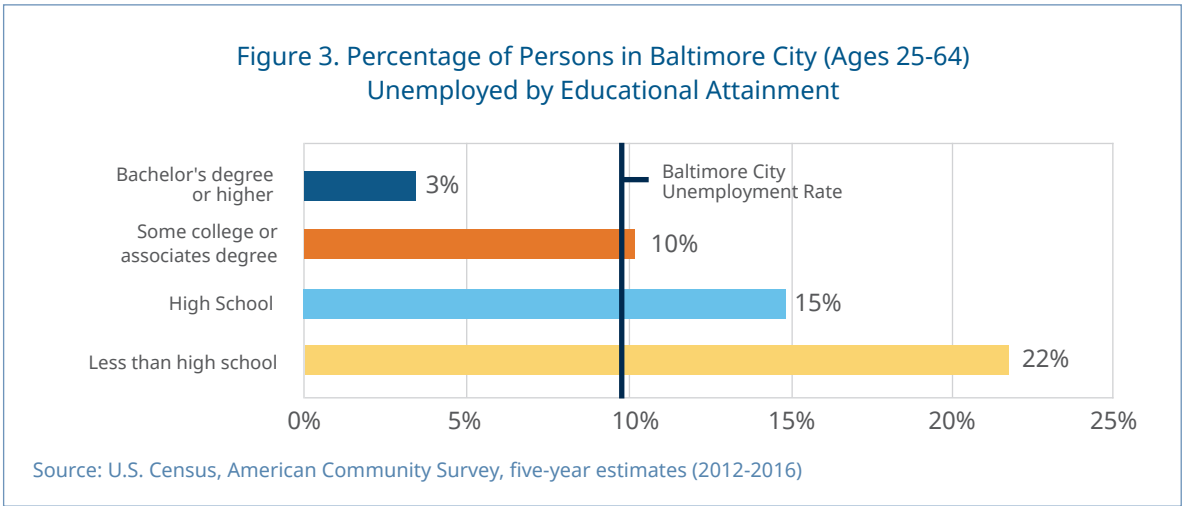
The lack of a high school diploma both reflects and exacerbates some of the most severe inequities in our society.

**Suppressed Employment and Earnings**

The absence of a high school diploma suppresses employment and earnings. Among Baltimore residents without a high school diploma who are in the labor force and actively seeking work, 22 percent are unemployed—a rate more than double the city’s average.

Median annual earnings for those without a high school diploma are currently estimated at \$21,359. These are poverty-level wages (2018 federal poverty level for family of four = \$25,100),<sup>6</sup> and well below the Maryland Self-Sufficiency Standard (2016 Maryland Self-Sufficiency Standard for family of four in Baltimore City = \$57,678).<sup>7</sup>

According to the U.S. Census American Community Survey, those with a high school diploma or its equivalent in Baltimore earn about \$7,000 more a year than those without one (an estimated \$28,396 versus \$21,359).



### Restricted Access to Further Education and Training

The lack of a high school credential also restricts opportunities for further education and training—that is, access to the sort of postsecondary career training required for competitiveness in pursuing the region’s middle-skill jobs.

For the most part, even noncredit workforce training programs at the region’s community colleges require a high school diploma. A recent review of occupational skills training programs in Baltimore found that 70 percent required a high school diploma or its equivalent for program entry, reflecting what the programs understand to be employer requirements for post-training job placement.<sup>8</sup>

### Correlation with Other Poor Outcomes

The correlation between not having a high school diploma and experiencing adverse conditions and circumstances among young people is particularly well documented. According to a 2009 analysis prepared by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University:

- Nationally, young people ages 16-24 who dropped out of high school have an employment rate that is 22 percentage points lower than their peers who completed high school (at employment rates of 46 percent versus 68 percent);
- Young women in this age group (16-24) who have dropped out of high school are six times more likely to have given birth than their peers who were college students or graduates; and
- Of young African-American males who were not high school graduates, 22 percent were incarcerated on any given day.<sup>9</sup>

### Costs to Taxpayers

The high cost of not holding a high school diploma is not borne by individuals and their families alone. Using national data from 2007, the Northeastern University study goes on to find that “the average high school dropout will cost taxpayers over \$292,000 in lower tax revenues, higher cash and in-kind transfer costs, and imposed incarceration costs relative to an average high school graduate.”<sup>10</sup>

## II. Existing Programs and Opportunities to Gain a Diploma: Results and Challenges

With personal and societal costs so high, what opportunities exist to earn a diploma for those who have left school without graduating?

There are three ways for adults to earn a high school diploma in Maryland:

1. **By graduating from a recognized educational institution, such as a public or private high school.** Maryland law supports young people in public secondary institutions up to age 21. According to the Maryland State Department of Education: “A student may remain in school if he/she is working to meet the requirements for a high school diploma until the age of 21... age 21 means the student is not 21 years old on the first day of the school year.”<sup>11</sup>

Maryland high school diplomas are conferred as students successfully meet all graduation requirements including the accumulation of 21 credits; successful passage of the English 10, Algebra I, Science, and Government High School Assessment (HSA) exams or an approved alternative assessment or bridge plan; and completion of 75 community service hours.

Maryland is also piloting a set of adult high schools that are under development across the state—including two in Baltimore City—and will directly confer a state high school diploma once requirements are met.

**2. By passing the GED test.** Initially developed for returning World War II soldiers whose schooling had been interrupted, the GED consists of four subject-area tests in Math, Reading and Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies. The GED test assesses performance in each subject area on a 200-point scale. In order to earn a diploma, test takers must receive a passing score of 145 or greater in all four subject areas. In 2014, the GED was revised to align with college- and career-readiness standards. It was increased in rigor and is now administered online. To prepare for the GED, candidates study on their own or online and/or participate in community- and community college-based education programs that offer pre-GED and GED instruction.

**3. By completing the National External Diploma Program.** The National External Diploma Program (NEDP) was developed in the early 1970s in response to a study of the needs of adult learners that found existing high school completion programs did not take into account accumulated life experiences and were generally delivered in a way inconsistent with the schedules of working adults. Currently, the NEDP is a self-directed “applied performance assessment system that assesses the high school level skills of adults and out-of-school youth” in 10 areas. The 10 areas are made up of three Foundational Competencies: Communication and Media Literacy, Applied Math/Numeracy and Information Technology; and seven Life Skills: Civic Literacy and Community Participation, Consumer Awareness and Financial Literacy, Cultural Literacy, Geography and History, Health Literacy, Science, and the 21st-Century Workplace. Assessments are made up of written work, observed work, presentations, and projects, and are measured against a set of performance standards.<sup>12</sup> Maryland high school diplomas are conferred on those who demonstrate 100 percent mastery of all NEDP competencies.

Not accounting for adult high schools, which are in a pilot phase (more on this later), three public agencies currently manage and fund the majority of efforts that are intended to lead to the receipt of a high school diploma by graduating from an accredited institution, passing the GED test, or completing the NEDP. They are:

- Baltimore City Public Schools (City Schools);
- The Mayor’s Office of Employment Development (MOED); and
- The Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation (DLLR).

This report identified 48 community-based programs that offer adult and computer literacy classes, GED preparation, and other educational services and supports. Many of these are off-site or partner programs of larger organizations that receive funding from DLLR.

Though by no means exhaustive, what follows is a macro-level summary of the efforts and outcomes of these programs and agencies as they work to support the educational advancement of Baltimore City residents.

### ***Baltimore City Public Schools***

Baltimore City Public Schools opened the Re-engagement Center (the REC) in 2014 under then-CEO Gregory Thornton to re-enroll those who had dropped out and support those who are at risk of doing so. Maintained under the administration of current CEO Sonja Santelises, the Re-engagement Center provides students with information and placement services in a consolidated location and links students to a variety of school-based and community resources intended to lead to the attainment of a high school diploma.<sup>13</sup>

According to Roger Shaw, director of the REC, the focus is on three primary populations:

- Students under the age of 21 who have dropped out;
- Those returning from public systems (such as the Department of Juvenile Services); and
- Those who have faced an acute crisis.

Opportunities for attaining a diploma include re-enrollment in a student's home school (where they were originally enrolled) or in one of four Accelerated Options programs that "serve students who are two or more years older than their grade-level peers. These programs help these students get back on track by earning credits at an accelerated rate."<sup>14</sup> The Career Academy and YO Academy (jointly operated by Baltimore City Public Schools and the Mayor's Office of Employment Development), along with the Excel Academy at Francis M. Wood and the Achievement Academy at Harbor City High, currently accept over-age and under-credited students. The Baltimore Community High School, which also served these students, closed in the summer of 2017.

Previous efforts to re-enroll those who had left included the Great Kids Come Back Campaign, which took place under the administration of Andres Alonso from 2011-2013.

No data specifically track the success of over-age and under-credited students—or those who have returned after dropping out. One, albeit imperfect, way to get at outcomes for these students is to look at fifth-year cohort data—that is, the number of students who graduated from City Schools within five years of their ninth-grade enrollment (as opposed to the traditional four-year cohort rate). According to available data (Table 2), the number of fifth-year cohort graduates from City Schools is declining over time and peaked during the years of the Great Kids Come Back Campaign, though it is worth noting that the total number of diplomas conferred has also declined throughout this period as has overall school enrollment.

Shaw noted that over the last year "about 540 students came to the office for a consultation. Of those, nearly 420 re-enrolled in a city school.

Table 2. Baltimore City Public Schools 5th-Year Cohort Graduates, 2011- 2016

Class	Graduating Year	Number of 5th Year Graduates	Total Diplomas for Class (including 5th year cohort)
2011	2012	339	4369
2012	2013	342	4523
2013	2014	*	4390
2014	2015	296	4130
2015	2016	279	3817
2016	2017	*	3838

Source: Maryland Report Card, five -year adjusted cohort graduation rate, accessed at: <http://reportcard.msde.maryland.gov/CohortGradRate.aspx?PV=163:12:30:AAAA:1:N:0:13:1:1:0:1:1:1:3#datatable333>

\* Numbers are suppressed in the Maryland Report Card Data because they represent less than 5 percent of the total cohort

About 78 percent of students who return to school through the office graduate.”<sup>15</sup> Such a rate would equate to 328 young people who have graduated after returning to school in the last academic year. While not all would be fifth-year cohort members, this would represent a significant uptick in the official data.

Also, in Fall 2017, Dr. Santelises convened an Advisory Task Force to make recommendations about how to increase enrollment in City Schools and prevent further decreases in state funding related to a declining number of students. The reported focus of these recommendations is on early school leavers, pre-kindergarteners, and Baltimore families not currently enrolled in City Schools. Additional efforts to regain and retain school leavers until their graduation may indeed be on the horizon.

### ***The Mayor’s Office of Employment Development***

To improve educational and employment outcomes for the city’s out-of-school and out-of-work young people—with a particular focus on those ages 18-24—the Mayor’s Office of

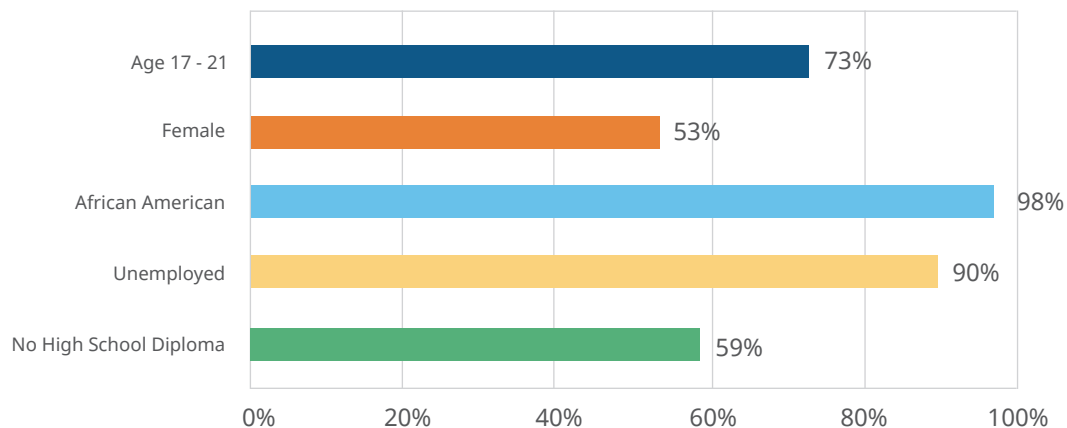
Employment Development operates the Career Academy and the YO Academy in conjunction with City Schools. It also runs two Youth Opportunity (YO) Centers, one each on the east and west sides of Baltimore.

Students at the Career Academy and YO Academy receive case management and career exploration supports from MOED staff, while teachers and school administrators are employees of City Schools. Those who graduate show up in the statistics for City Schools.

Youth ages 18-20 can choose to return to City Schools and attend the Career Academy, YO Academy, or another Accelerated Options school. Youth ages 21-24 looking to gain their diploma can participate in GED and pre-GED prep at one of the YO Centers.<sup>16</sup>

For this paper, MOED provided demographic, educational attainment, and employment data for 1,264 young people who enrolled in the east- and west-side YO Centers over fiscal years 2016 and 2017.<sup>17</sup> Of these young people, 59 percent (or 749 participants) did not have a high school diploma at the time of their enrollment.

**Figure 5. Snapshot of YO Enrollment, Fiscal Years 2016 and 2017 (n = 1,264)**



Source: Mayor’s Office of Employment Development, Youth Opportunity Data for the period July 1, 2015 to June 30, 2017

YO Centers began operation in 2000 and were initially funded under the U.S. Department of Labor's national Youth Opportunity grant program. Thirty-six high-poverty communities in the United States were awarded grant funds to improve labor market outcomes for young people ages 14–24. In total, Baltimore received \$44 million in federal funding for the effort.<sup>18</sup> In 2007, when federal Youth Opportunity funds ended, YO Centers became a line item in the Baltimore City Budget. In fiscal year 2017, the second of the fiscal years covered in the participant data provided by MOED for this review, Baltimore City General Funds of \$2,670,290 were expended. In fiscal year 2018, \$2,928,616 of City General Funds were budgeted for YO.<sup>19</sup>

Outcomes data for YO make evident the struggle young people without a high school diploma have in gaining this basic credential.

Many of the young people who enroll in YO attended high school but never graduated. On average, at entry, they have reading scores at an eighth-grade level and math scores at a sixth-grade level.<sup>20</sup> Of YO participants who actively sought to gain an educational credential upon their enrollment, 14 percent gained a high school diploma.

### ***Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation***

The Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation (DLLR) combines state dollars and federal funds available under the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) of Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) to make annual grants to programs across Maryland that provide Adult Basic and Secondary Education (ABE/ ASE), GED preparation, and English as a

**Table 3. Educational Attendance and Outcomes for Baltimore Youth Opportunity (YO) Centers, Fiscal Years 2016 and 2017**

	Number	Percent of Total Enrollment	Percent of Those With Education Attendance
Total Enrollment	1,264		
No High School Diploma	749	59%	
Educational Attendance (participated in educational programming)	475	38%	
Increased Reading or Math Skills	96	8%	20%
Received a High School Diploma	66	5%	14%
Received an AA (4) or BA (1) Degree	5	0.4%	1%

Source: Mayor's Office of Employment Development, Youth Opportunity Data for the period July 1, 2015 to June 30, 2017

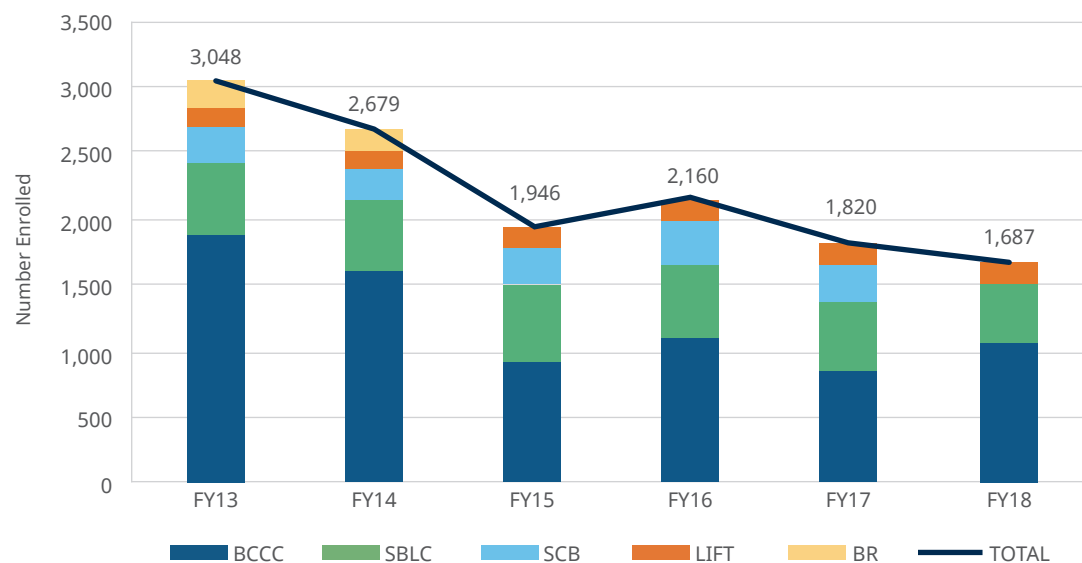
Second Language (ESL) instruction. The Baltimore City Community College (BCCC), the South Baltimore Learning Center (SBLC), and Strong City Baltimore (SCB/formerly Greater Homewood) currently receive these grants. DLLR also manages Maryland's participation in the NEDP. There are 12 programs throughout the state that offer the NEDP. The South Baltimore Learning Center is the sole Baltimore City program to do so.

For this paper, the Division of Workforce Development and Adult Learning provided funding, demographic, and outcomes data for Baltimore City programs receiving state and federal support from DLLR along with summary results from programs in other jurisdictions.<sup>21</sup> These data are gathered as part of the mandated annual collection for AEFLA-funded programs. While they do not represent total enrollment and outcomes for all adult education programs in Baltimore—or even for all the programs operated

by these three organizations—these data do give us a picture of those who are seeking to advance their education and earnings by participating in adult education programs in Baltimore and the results of their efforts.

According to the data provided, annual enrollment in DLLR-funded adult education programs in Baltimore City peaked at 3,048 in fiscal year 2013, when programs reported higher-than-usual enrollments as many participants sought to prepare for and take the GED before the 2014 changes went into effect. In fiscal year 2018, enrollment in DLLR-funded programs in the city was reported at 1,687 (see Figure 6). Baltimore Reads (BR) ceased operation in 2014. Learning is for Tomorrow (LIFT), a Baltimore-based program that focused on literacy for adults with disabilities, declined to reapply for AEFLA/DLLR funds after fiscal year 2017.

Figure 6. Enrollment in DLLR-Funded Adult Education Programs in Baltimore City, Fiscal Years 2013 – 2018



Source: Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation and Baltimore City Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) Grant-Funded Programs, November 2018

Total state and federal funding available for adult education in Baltimore from DLLR was \$1,909,547 for fiscal year 2018 (see Table 4). Funding dropped 23 percent from fiscal year 2015 when \$2,474,769 was awarded to four Baltimore City programs. Declines in enrollment; changes in the state funding formula that lowered the state's allowable average per person (from \$1,200 to \$800 annually); and an increased emphasis on measureable learning gains consistent with the re-authorization of the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act are all reported to have contributed to the decrease in funds available for Baltimore programs.

Of the \$1,909,547 in grants from DLLR to Baltimore City programs in fiscal year 2018, just over 60 percent (\$1,170,029) came from Maryland's Literacy Works Program; the rest from federal sources. (See Appendix B for a breakdown of DLLR grant funding by source for fiscal year 2018.)

### DLLR-Funded Program Enrollment and Demographics in Fiscal Year 2018

In fiscal year 2018, 1,687 Baltimore City residents enrolled in and attended at least 12 hours of programming at one of the three DLLR-funded organizations in Baltimore. More than half of all enrollees (62 percent) attended programming at Baltimore City Community College or one of its community-based sites.

The majority of enrollees:

- Are African-American (88 percent);
- Had attended high school, but not received a diploma (81 percent had some high school; the remainder left school before the ninth grade); and
- Were assessed upon program enrollment at a reading level of less than ninth grade (95 percent).

Table 4. State and Federal Funding for Baltimore Adult Education Programs via DLLR, Fiscal Year 2018

Program	Grant Amount
Baltimore City Community College	\$936,805
South Baltimore Learning Center	\$561,828
Strong City Baltimore/Greater Homewood	\$410,914
<b>Total, Fiscal Year 2018</b>	<b>\$1,909,547</b>

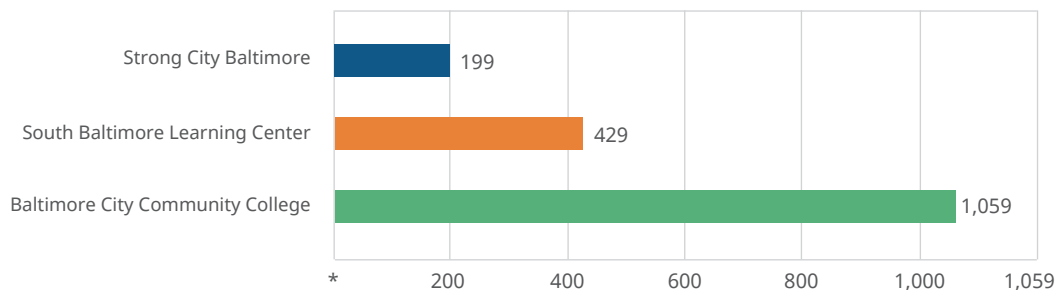
Source: Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation and Baltimore City Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) Grant-Funded Programs, October 2017



Whether or not current enrollment meets demand is an unanswered question. Some programs keep waiting lists and report that they are unable to enroll all who would like to attend. Others have no such record. Enrollees in programs funded by DLLR represent roughly 2.5 percent of Baltimore City adults over the age of 25 who do not have a

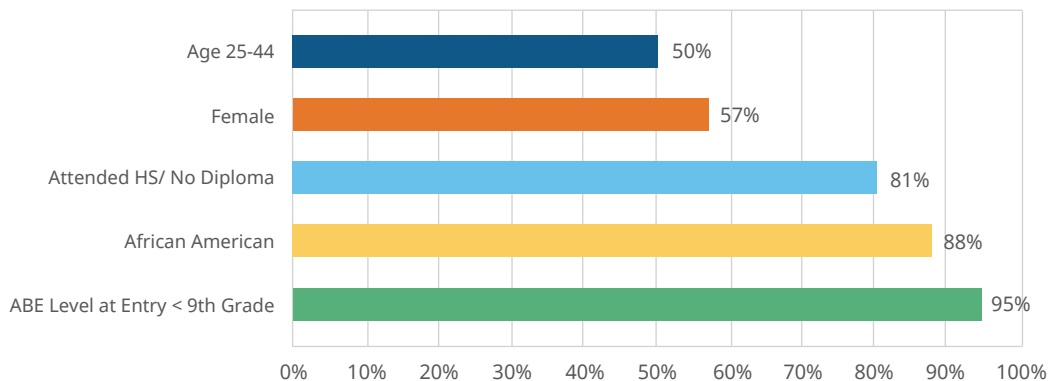
high school diploma. Beginning in fiscal year 2019, DLLR-funded programs will track and report data on those who initially attend a program but do not meet the 12-hour threshold for mandated reporting. This may shed at least partial light on the number of city residents who seek to enroll but ultimately do not do so.

**Figure 7. Adult Education Enrollment in Baltimore City DLLR-Funded Programs, Fiscal Year 2018**



Source: Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation, Baltimore City Enrollment Fiscal Year 2018, November 2018

**Figure 8. Snapshot of Enrollment in Adult Education in Baltimore DLLR-Funded Programs, Fiscal Year 2018 (n = 1,647)**



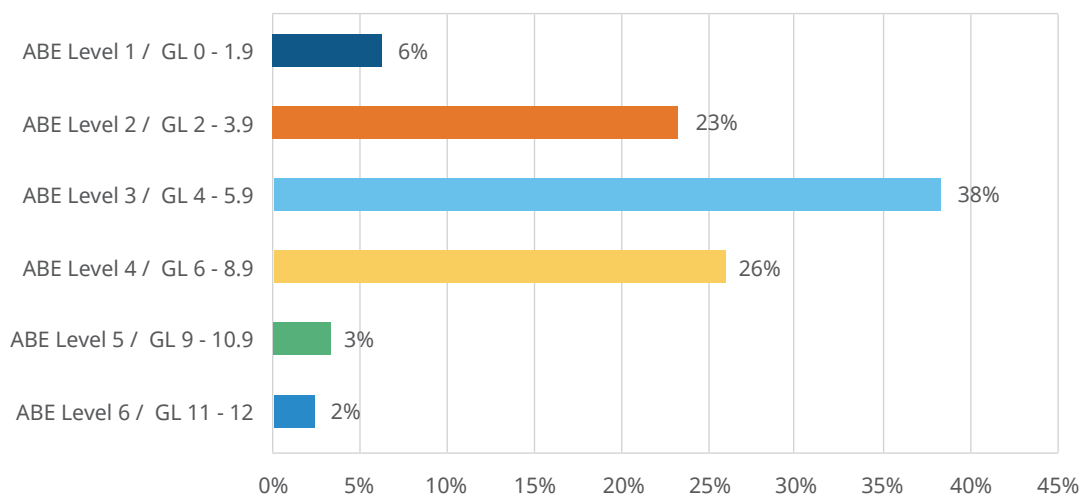
Source: Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation, Baltimore City Enrollment Fiscal Year 2018, November 2018

Table 5. Educational Functioning Levels with Grade-Level Equivalencies

Educational Functioning Level	Grade Level Equivalency
ABE Level 1	Beginning Literacy
ABE Level 2	Beginning Basic Education
ABE Level 3	Low Intermediate Basic Education
ABE Level 4	High Intermediate Basic Education
ABE Level 5	Low Adult Secondary Education
ABE Level 6	High Adult Secondary Education

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Reporting System for Adult Education, Test Benchmarks for Educational Functioning Levels, updated February 2015, with current classifications added 2018

Figure 9. Assessed ABE Level at Program Entry, Baltimore DLLR-Funded Programs, Fiscal Year 2018



Source: Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation, Baltimore City Enrollment Fiscal Year 2018, November 2018

To determine placement and to monitor progress pre- and post-program participation, participants take an assessment exam upon enrollment (generally either the TABE or CASAS<sup>22</sup>), and are assigned an Educational Functioning Level that corresponds to an academic grade level. Standard categories are detailed in Table 5.

Very few Baltimore participants were assessed as performing at a secondary level upon program entry—that is, at a ninth-grade level or above (see Figure 9). Across the DLLR-funded Baltimore programs in fiscal year 2018, 5 percent of participants were assessed at the secondary level (ninth grade or above), 2 percent at ABE Level 6 (11th- and 12th-grade), and 3 percent at ABE Level 5 (ninth- and 10th-grade). The remaining 95 percent were assessed at below a ninth-grade level, with the majority falling at ABE Level 3, or between fourth- and sixth-grade.

## Participant Outcomes

Program performance is reported in two ways:

- By the number and percent of adult learners who increased an Educational Functioning Level (as per the levels noted in Table 5); and
- By the number and percentage of those who register for and take their high school assessment (the GED or NEDP) and then go on to successfully complete that assessment.

The following results are offered with the caveat that diploma receipt may be underrepresented as, in some instances, programs rely on participants to report back with their results. That said, available information indicates that 45 Baltimore City adults gained their high school diploma through DLLR-funded programs in fiscal year 2018 (see Table 6).

**Table 6. Diploma Receipt and Skills Gain by Educational Functioning Level at Enrollment, Fiscal Year 2018**

Level	# Diploma	# Skills Gain	Total Enrolled	% Diploma	% Skills Gain	% Skills Gain or Diploma
ABE Level 1	0	43	107	0%	40%	40%
ABE Level 2	0	168	392	0%	43%	43%
ABE Level 3	8	233	648	1%	36%	37%
ABE Level 4	24	89	439	5%	20%	26%
ABE Level 5	4	19	59	7%	32%	39%
ABE Level 6	9	3	42	21%	7%	29%
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>555</b>	<b>1687</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>36%</b>

Source: Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation, Baltimore City Enrollment Fiscal Year 2018, November 2018

Across reported enrollment for Baltimore DLLR-funded adult education programs, 3 percent of participants earned a high school diploma in fiscal year 2018. One-third had a skill-level gain. As one might expect, the enrollees with the greatest success in earning their diplomas entered at an 11th- and 12th-grade level. Twenty-one percent of these enrollees earned their diploma. Skill-level gains were highest for those at ABE Level 2 (those who entered at between second- and fourth-grade levels). Forty-three percent of these participants advanced one or more levels.

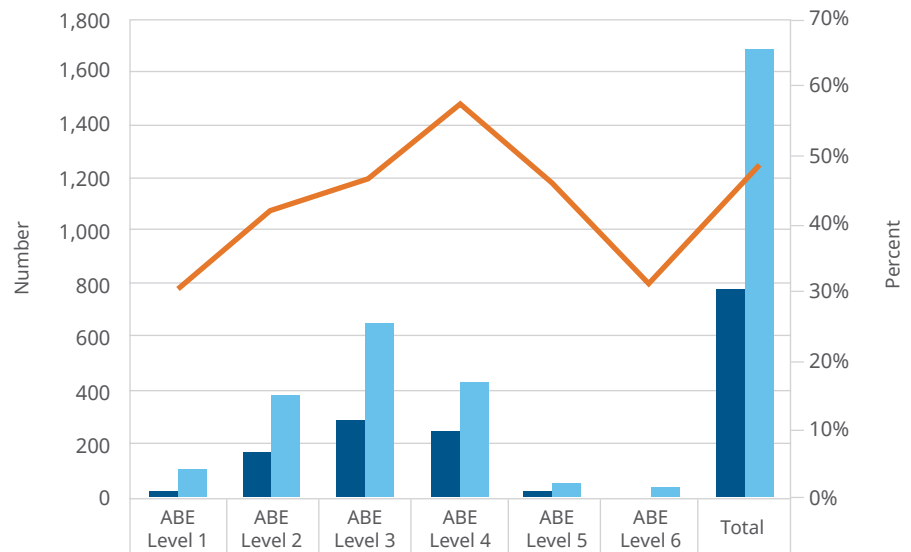
In fiscal year 2017, 65 participants in state-funded adult education programs in Baltimore earned high school diplomas. Within this total, 25 diplomas were awarded

through the National External Diploma Program offered by the SBLC.

The SBLC ran a separate analysis on the age, gender, race, previous educational attainment, assessed reading level at entry, and average hours spent for its participants who earned a diploma in fiscal year 2017 by passing the GED test or completing the NEDP (see Appendix C).

When compared to GED completers, those who earned their diploma via the NEDP were older, more likely to be African-American, and spent twice as long in preparation for their assessment (268 average hours for NEDP recipients versus 131 average hours for those who received their diploma via the GED). Both groups entered with similar levels of prior educational experience and assessed reading levels.

Figure 10. Number and Percent of Enrollees Who Exited Program Without a Diploma or Skill-Level Gain, Baltimore City DLLR-Funded Programs, Fiscal Year 2018



Exited Program without Gain	33	164	301	251	27	13	789
Total Enrolled	107	392	648	439	59	42	1,687
% Exited Program	31%	42%	46%	57%	46%	31%	47%

Source: Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation, Baltimore City Enrollment Fiscal Year 2018, November 2018, analysis by author

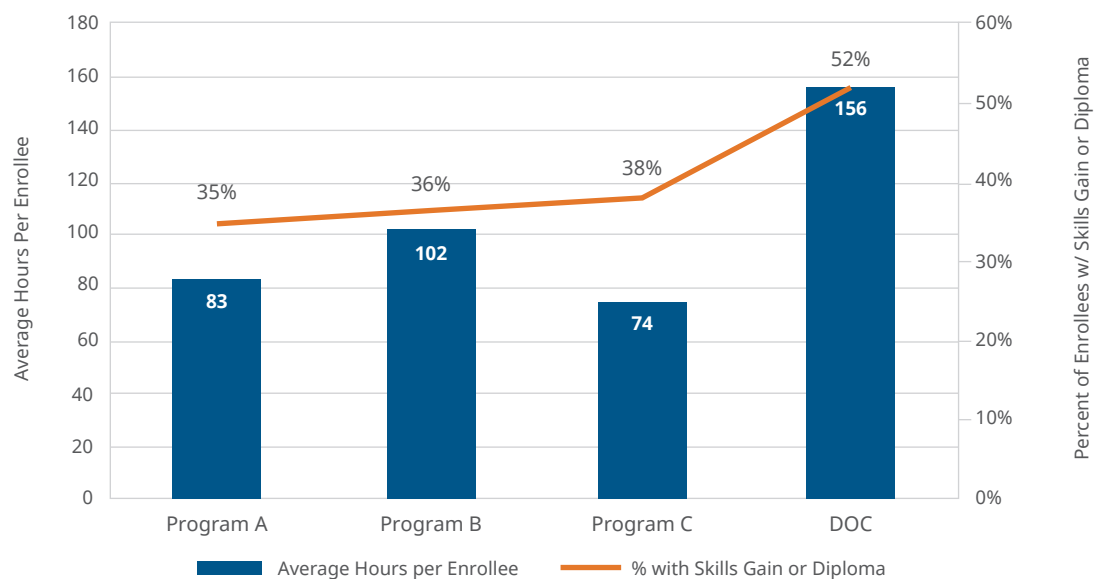
## Participant Completion

Time spent in preparation is a significant factor for participant success. However, in all Baltimore programs, many participants leave before their course is completed—and before they have made any gains. Figure 10 notes the percent of enrollees who left their program before making any gains and is organized by Educational Functioning Level at enrollment. The highest percentage of leavers are those assessed at levels placing them between sixth and eighth grades. Fifty-seven percent of enrollees at this level left their program before completing and without skills gains. Overall, 47 percent of enrollees

exited their program prior to a functional-level gain or diploma receipt.

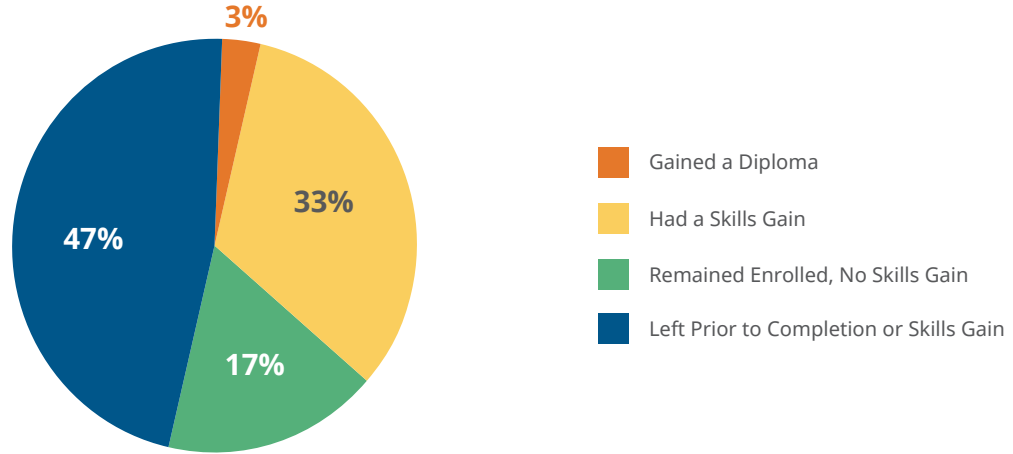
DLLR also provided enrollment, completion, and outcomes data for Maryland Department of Corrections (DOC) Adult Education programs. DOC programs boast the highest performance rate in the state (at 52 percent for skill-level gains and/or diplomas in fiscal year 2018) and the most hours spent per participant (at an average of 156 hours per participant). A higher average number of hours spent per participant is, of course, understandable given DOC students' confinement. Across all programs, hours spent appears to be related to skill gains.

Figure 11. Baltimore City and Department of Corrections, Adult Education Programs: Diplomas and Skills Gains Alongside Average Hours Attended, Fiscal Year 2018



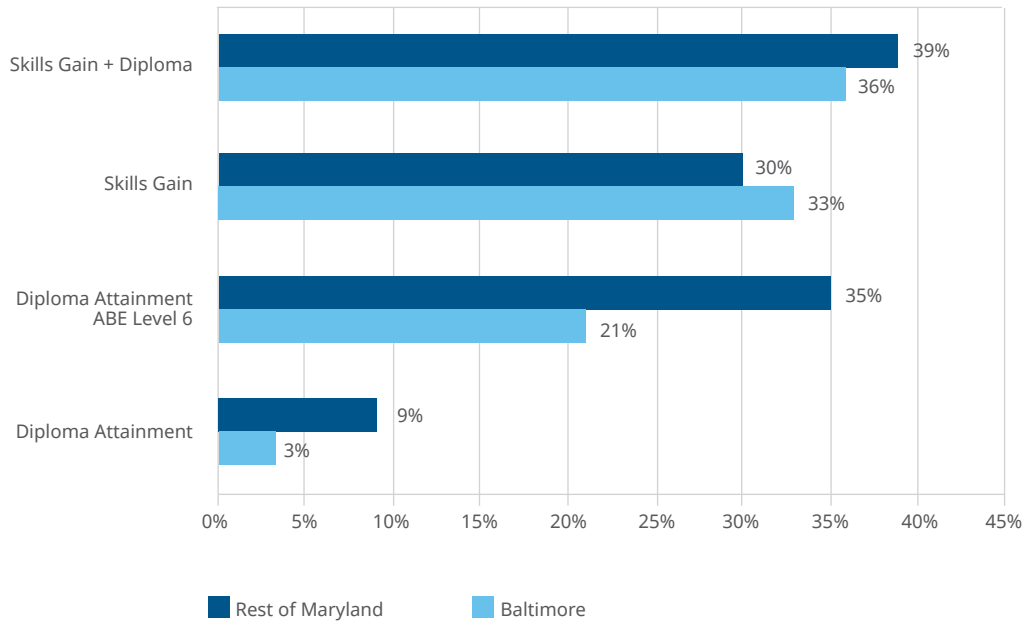
Source: Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation, Baltimore City Enrollment Fiscal Year 2018, November 2018

Figure 12. Summary Outcomes: Participants in Baltimore City DLLR-Funded Programs, Fiscal Year 2018 (n = 1,687)



Source: Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation, Baltimore City Enrollment Fiscal Year 2018, November 2018

Figure 13. Participant Outcomes in DLLR-Funded Programs, Baltimore City and the Rest of Maryland, Fiscal Year 2018



Source: Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation, Baltimore City Enrollment Fiscal Year 2018, November 2018; analysis by author

## Summary of DLLR-Funded Program Enrollment and Results

During fiscal year 2018, 1,687 Baltimore adults enrolled in Adult Basic Education programs funded by DLLR. Of these:

- 47 percent (789 adults) left the program in which they enrolled without a functional-level gain or diploma;
- 17 percent (298 adults) completed their program, but had no functional-level gain;
- 33 percent (555 adults) had a functional-level gain; and
- 3 percent (45 adults) earned their diploma—down from 65 diplomas (and 4 percent of enrollees) in fiscal year 2017.

Both seat time and functional level at enrollment appear to be related to diploma receipt and skill-level gains.

## Comparison to State Results

For most results, outcomes for Baltimore participants are similar to those of enrollees in other Maryland jurisdictions (see Figure 13) with the notable exception of high school diploma receipt. Overall, 3 percent of Baltimore City program enrollees earned their diploma in fiscal year 2018, while 9 percent of enrollees across the rest of the state earned their high school credential. In fiscal year 2018, among participants who were assessed at 11th- and 12th-grade levels at program entry (ABE Level 6), 21 percent of those who enrolled in city programs earned their diploma; the comparable figure for ABE Level 6 enrollees from the rest of the state was 35 percent.

## Community-Based Programs in Baltimore

In addition to and including the major providers described above, public information on supports and services in Baltimore give an overview of the number and type of opportunities out-of-school youth and adults without a high school diploma have to build their skills and prepare for a high school diploma.

Data in Table 7 (next page) come from the United Way 211 Maryland Community Services Locator online database, from a listing of satellite Adult Basic Education sites operated in partnership with the Baltimore City Community College, and from key informant interviews. This list includes cursory information on 48 programs, including the programs operated by BCCC, SBLC, and SCB.<sup>23</sup> Given that partnerships and community locations change from year to year, this summary is best taken as a point-in-time, rather than a comprehensive review. Because categories differ slightly across the data sources, multiple categories have been combined here in an attempt to get a current picture of services.

Categories included are:

- **General Education Services** – General education classes and/or one-on-one tutoring in literacy or computer literacy (as noted when information allows);
- **ABE** – Adult Basic Education services, or educational services for those performing at a “basic” level (eighth grade or below);
- **ASE** – Adult Secondary Education services, or educational services for those performing at a “secondary” level (grades nine through 12);
- **GED** – specified preparation for the GED test;
- **NEDP** – preparation for the National External Diploma Program;
- **DLLR** – Funding from state and federal resources managed by the Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation (DLLR), which supported three major Baltimore programs in fiscal year 2018 (noted in bold and italics); and
- **Satellite Site** – a community-based program site operated in conjunction with one of the three DLLR-funded organizations: BCCC, SBLC, or SCB.

Table 7. Adult Education Programs in Baltimore (2017-2018)

Level	General Education	ABE	ASE	GED	NEDP	DLLR	Satellite Site
<b>Baltimore City Community College (BCCC)</b>	Y (Computer Literacy)	Y	Y	Y		Y	
Baltimore Housing Authority (Armistead Gardens, Brooklyn Homes, Gillmor Homes, Latrobe Homes, O'Donnell Heights, Our House, Pleasantview Gardens)	Y (Computer Literacy)	Y	Y				BCCC
Baltimore Urban League	Y	Y	Y				BCCC
Benjamin Franklin High School at Masonville Cove	Y	Y	Y				BCCC
BioTechnical Institute of Maryland		Y		Y			SBLC
Bon Secours Community Works/ Bon Secours Family Support Center	Y (Tutoring)	Y	Y				BCCC
Caroline Center				Y			
Center for Urban Families	Y (Tutoring, Literacy)	Y	Y				BCCC
Civic Works	Y (Literacy)			Y			SBLC
City Temple	Y	Y					BCCC
Clay Pots/ A Place to Grow	Y (Literacy, Computer Literacy)	Y	Y	Y			BCCC SBLC
DRU Judy Center	Y	Y					BCCC
Druid Heights Community Development Corporation	Y	Y	Y				BCCC
Dyslexia Tutoring Program	Y (Tutoring, Literacy)						
Eastside Career Center/ One Stop	Y (Literacy, Computer Literacy)	Y	Y				BCCC
Eastside Youth Opportunity Center/ HEBCAC	Y	Y	Y	Y			
Enoch Pratt Free Library (Edmondson Avenue, Hamilton, Orleans Street, Pennsylvania Avenue)	Y (Literacy, Computer Literacy)	Y	Y				BCCC SCB/ ALC
Family and Children's Services/ Early Head Start	Y			Y			
Family Recovery Program	Y	Y					BCCC



Level	General Education	ABE	ASE	GED	NEDP	DLLR	Satellite Site
Franciscan Center	Y						SCB/ALC
Goodwill Industries	Y	Y	Y	Y			BCCC
Healthy Start	Y	Y	Y	Y			BCCC
Helping Up Mission	Y (Learning Center)						
Hampden Family Center	Y						SCB/ALC
I Can't We Can	Y	Y					BCCC
Jane Addams Resource Corporation				Y			SBLC
Job Corps	Y	Y	Y	Y			
Judy Center/ Moravia	Y (Literacy)	Y					BCCC
Living Classrooms Foundation				Y			
Marian House	Y						SCB/ALC
Maryland Center for Adult Training			Y	Y			
My Sister's Place Women's Center	Y	Y					BCCC
New Era Academy	Y	Y	Y				BCCC
The North Avenue Learning Initiative	Y	Y	Y	Y			
Northwest Career Center	Y (Literacy, Computer Literacy)	Y	Y	Y			BCCC, SBLC
Our Daily Bread	Y	Y					BCCC
Penn North Recovery Housing	Y	Y	Y				BCCC
Power House World Ministries	Y (Literacy, Computer Literacy)	Y	Y				BCCC
Shapiro Training and Education Program (STEP)	Y	Y	Y				
<b>South Baltimore Learning Center (SBLC)</b>	<b>Y (Literacy, Computer Literacy)</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Y</b>	

Level	General Education	ABE	ASE	GED	NEDP	DLLR	Satellite Site
Southeast Baltimore Early Head Start Center	Y (Literacy, Computer Literacy)	Y	Y	Y			BCCC
St. Bernadine's Head Start	Y		Y	Y			
St. Francis Neighborhood Center	Y						
St. Vincent de Paul of Baltimore/ Career Center	Y						
<b>Strong City Baltimore Adult Learning Center</b>	<b>Y (Tutoring, Literacy, Computer Literacy)</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Y</b>		<b>Y</b>	
Village Learning Place	Y (Tutoring, Literacy)	Y	Y				
Waverly Early Head Start Center	Y	Y	Y				
Westside Youth Opportunity Center	Y (Tutoring, Literacy)	Y	Y	Y			

Source: United Way 211 Maryland Community Services Locator, Baltimore City Community College Fall 2017 Master Schedule, DLLR, SBLC, SCB/ALC; compilation by author

Of the 48 programs and locations on this list, the majority offer instruction and support to learners at the Adult Basic Education Level, 28 offer Adult Secondary Education, and 20 provide specific preparation for the GED. As noted previously, the South Baltimore Learning Center is the only location to offer preparation for the National External Diploma Program.

### **Summary of Results and Possible Explanations for Current Levels of Diploma Receipt**

Thousands of Baltimore City residents enroll in adult education programs. Hundreds of City Schools' students persist in a fifth year beyond their expected four-year graduation date. Hundreds more participate in MOED's Youth Opportunity Program. Yet, few city residents

actually gain a diploma through these alternative means. Though at best a guess, estimates from the data currently available indicate that approximately 370 additional Maryland high school diplomas are granted to city residents in a year.

Need is great. Programs seem to be available. But few city residents successfully gain a high school diploma once they have passed their expected date of graduation from high school. So what else might be at work?

Previous research and interviews conducted for the Baltimore Integration Partnership,<sup>24</sup> a 2002 paper prepared for the Abell Foundation,<sup>25</sup> and more recent conversations with youth advocates and program providers<sup>26</sup> all point to a series of possible explanations around the attributes of adult education programs, the needs and competing demands of adult

Table 8. Annual Estimate of Alternative High School Diploma Receipt

Means of Gaining a Diploma	Data Source/ Organization or Program	Estimated Annual Diplomas Awarded
Graduation from a recognized educational institution	Maryland Report Card, Baltimore City Public Schools fifth-year cohort data, class of 2015, graduating in 2016	279
GED	MOED YO Center participants annual average (average of fiscal years 2016 and 2017)	33
GED and NEDP	DLLR-funded program performance data (average of fiscal years 2017 and 2018)	55
<b>Total</b>		<b>367</b>

Note: See analyses in the sections above for sources and estimates.

education students, educational deficits accruing to students in Baltimore City Schools, and the fact that what exists here is a loose network of programs for alternative high school diploma receipt.

**Adult education program attributes** reported to constrain completion include:

- **Staffing by part time, contractual program leadership, teachers and volunteers.** According to the Maryland Association for Adult, Community and Continuing Education, statewide 89 percent of teachers are part-time as are 59 percent of administrators.
- **Sufficient rigor and intensity in existing program curricula and methods** especially in light of changes to the GED.
- **The related amount of “seat time”** it takes to advance through levels of preparedness. One often repeated estimate is that it takes 150 hours of seat time to advance one educational functioning level. Imagine entering between the fourth and sixth grade level (the level at which most adults students enter). According

to the 150 hour-per-level-increase estimate, and given that there are three functional levels between sixth and 12th grade, it would take 450 hours to get to the 12th grade level. Say for example, that programming is for six hours per week and is offered for 36 weeks a year (three, 12 week sessions). This program would take two years of consistent attendance to complete—this despite the fact that most entrants have completed some high school.

- **Scheduling challenges for working people**—especially when programs are offered during the day.
- **Funding and comprehensiveness of current program models.** Baltimore City program operators funded by DLLR note the challenges of supporting adult students on the \$800 per-learner budget currently approved by the state. This amount is down from \$1,200 in fiscal year 2016, which was also inadequate, providers report, to meeting the needs of adult learners that include child care, transportation, case management, and other supportive services.

**Adult education student attributes** that challenge diploma attainment include:

- **Poor prior experiences with and a weak attachment to formal education.**
- **Low-levels of academic readiness.** MOED reports that YO participants' average reading level at enrollment is 8th grade, with an average of 6th grade in math. Ninety-five percent of Baltimore City adults attending a DLLR-funded adult education program in Fiscal Year 2018 entered at an assessed reading level below the 9th grade.
- **The possibility of undiagnosed learning difficulties/delays.** None of the programs currently receiving DLLR funds has a standardized protocol for identifying learning difficulties and delays, nor do the YO Centers. Interviewees report their perception of this as a pervasive problem—and one perhaps related to previous academic struggles and dropping out.
- **Social and emotional challenges as a result of trauma**—especially present among young people who have recently left school. YO staff in particular noted the high levels of depression and anxiety they see in young people who are struggling with the effects of violence and loss.
- **Family and economic constraints** including raising children and the need to work to support oneself and others that can make it difficult to find the time to devote the “seat time” necessary to advance—especially when programs adhere to a set time and class schedule.
- **The intergenerational transmission of literacy.** From the work of James Coleman<sup>27</sup> on, parents' educational experiences have empirically been linked to the educational success of their children. This, of course, also holds true for adult learners who were once children themselves.

Reminding us of this relationship, ProLiteracy, a national organization that champions adult education, cites a National Bureau of Economic Research finding that “children whose parents have low literacy levels have a 72 percent chance of being at the lowest reading levels themselves.”<sup>28</sup> Struggles with education and with literacy are inherited.

- **Concentrated poverty.** A well-documented obstacle to academic success in school-aged children,<sup>29</sup> a lifetime spent in concentrated poverty also affects adult learners. It is no coincidence that Baltimore City communities with the highest percentages of residents who do not have a high school diploma are also communities that have high levels of poverty (Figure 14). Individual struggles with school completion are a reflection of broad-based and systemic inequalities at the community level.

### Baltimore City School System Failures

Anecdotally, the academic preparedness of young people who have spent time in City Schools is one of the greatest barriers to alternative high school diploma receipt through the GED. As one GED instructor described, “I ask young people where they have gone to elementary and middle school. If they say Baltimore City, I know they're in for trouble. If they say Montgomery County, they're going to be okay.” She went on to explain that most of this has to do with limited vocabulary, the lack of an ability to read for meaning, and critical thinking skills. Of these, vocabulary/literacy challenges are the greatest. “They have no words. No experience with the using of words. They can't even negotiate the books [for the GED].”

These challenges have been exacerbated by the new GED exam, which requires vocabulary and reading for meaning even in the math sections. “The math almost kills them. They've never seen anything like it.”

Figure 14. Percent of Residents Without a High School Diploma and Percent of Households Earning Less than \$25,000 Annually, Baltimore City Community Statistical Areas, 2016



Source: Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance, Vital Signs, U.S. Census American Community Survey, 2016; compilation by author

Other interviewees pointed to inconsistencies in the delivery of curricula in City Schools' alternative schools and the difficulty in matching course offerings in these settings with the specific credits students need to graduate. They describe an ever-changing and unpredictable combination of teacher-led classroom instruction and online credit recovery that may or may not deliver the specific courses or credits that individual students need to qualify for their diploma.

### A Loose Network of Programs

There are certainly major players in the field: DLLR, which distributes state and federal funding and provides training and technical assistance to program operators who receive these funds across Maryland; Baltimore City Community College, which delivers the bulk of adult education programming in the city; and the Maryland Association for Adult, Community, and Continuing Education

(MAACCE), which represents program providers statewide. However, no single entity has alternative high school diploma receipt in Baltimore as its core mission, manages local funding, and/or demands accountability for adult education in the city.

Baltimore Reads, established as a quasi-governmental entity under the Schmoke administration in 1988, was an effort to bring urgency, exert leadership, and build capacity around adult literacy citywide. After several changes in leadership and focus, years of declining funding, and the withdrawal of financial support from the city, it ceased operations in 2014.<sup>30</sup>

### III. Emerging Opportunities to Accelerate High School Completion

Amid these challenges, however, is a growing recognition of the problem and an increasing desire to do something about it.

#### *Growing Recognition of the Problem*

Associated Black Charities and the Greater Baltimore Committee together released an analysis of the opportunity for family supporting, middle skill jobs in STEM occupations in growing sectors of the regional economy. A key recommendation of this report was to attend to the basic skills gap among job seeking adults.<sup>31</sup>

Precursor work such as the Opportunity Collaborative's Workforce Development Plan and research completed for the Baltimore Integration Partnership recommended:

- Increasing the availability, awareness and completion of ABE, ESL and GED preparation courses and continuance into skills training and higher education.<sup>32</sup>; and
- Building out basic bridging efforts and programs that combine contextualized education with occupational skill development to open up career pathways to a broader set of city residents with focused attention on GED program completion.<sup>33</sup>

And though concerted action has yet to be taken, Mayor Pugh raised adult literacy as a critical issue during her 2016 campaign.<sup>34</sup>

#### *Local Innovation*

##### Adult High Schools in Maryland

Informed by these policy recommendations and encouraged by examples from other cities including the District of Columbia and Indianapolis, the Maryland General Assembly during its 2016 session considered legislation to establish adult high schools that would directly confer a Maryland high school diploma upon graduation.

Experience from around the country indicates that increased diploma attainment through high schools particularly designed for adults is indeed possible.

- The District of Columbia established a number of adult charter schools that provide contextualized GED/ABE instruction and an introduction to careers. Some also offer introductory career credentials.
- In Philadelphia, Project U-Turn is a program supported by the public school system that offers a customized pathway to a GED or a high school diploma for older youth who have previously left school.
- The Excel Center in Indianapolis offers instruction toward an Indiana high school diploma, occupational skills training leading to an industry certification, and college credit. According to Goodwill Industries of Central Indiana, which operates the Excel Center, since inception in 2010, the program has expanded to 11 sites and now serves 3,500 students a year. Wage record analysis recently completed for Goodwill notes significant increases in annual earnings of greater than \$9,000 and employment rates for graduates when compared to their peers who did not gain a diploma.<sup>35</sup>

Maryland is expanding options for adult learners. Given the lack of a publicly identified funding source, however, and the requirement that all standard criteria for graduation be met, it remains to be seen how quickly these programs will be up and running—and whether many more adults will receive their diplomas once these programs open.

In Maryland, the initial enabling legislation for adult high schools was amended to set up a task force to study the issue—including school composition and leadership, curriculum, and funding—and to make recommendations to the legislature.<sup>36</sup> Upon completion of its work in 2017, the Task Force to Study the Adult High School Concept recommended that Maryland issue a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) for possible operators of adult high schools, though no state-funding mechanism was recommended. In Baltimore, two adult high schools have been approved and are in development. The South Baltimore Adult High School is a partnership between Elev8 Baltimore (a not-for-profit dedicated to educational advancement), Baltimore City Community College, and the Cherry Hill Development Corporation and is expected to begin classes in the fall of 2019. Goodwill Industries of the Chesapeake has also been approved to open an adult high school in Baltimore, building on the example of the Excel Center in Indiana.

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### Adult Education and Occupational Skills Training

Recognizing that a high school diploma is a necessary but insufficient credential for competitiveness in the current labor market, cities, states, and community colleges around the country have experimented with combining contextualized adult basic education and occupational skills training in ways that lead to both a high school diploma and industry certification.

The most widely known of these is the Washington State I-BEST (Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training) effort targeting a number of community colleges across that state. Students participating in I-BEST have significantly higher rates of credit and credential attainment and ABE skills gained, when compared to their peers who enter community college as traditional students.<sup>37</sup>

Another example comes from the East Coast where La Guardia Community College in New York established a “bridge” program that combined GED preparation with reinforced contextualized instruction with relevance to the health and business professions. Education and social policy research outfit MDRC conducted a randomized controlled trial to look at outcomes of participants in the bridge program versus those who enrolled

in a traditional GED prep course. Statistically significant differences were found in program completion, GED attainment, and future enrollment in post-secondary education.<sup>38</sup>

### MI-BEST/ACE

In Maryland, an attempt was made between 2011 and 2013 to replicate I-BEST through a demonstration project supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Maryland Workforce Development Corporation. The Maryland Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (MI-BEST) initiative supported six Maryland jurisdictions in designing and carrying out pilot career pathway programs modeled after Washington State's initiative. Baltimore City's effort focused on GED program completion and CNA/GNA certification, an entry-level credential in a health-careers pathway. While Baltimore GED completion and employment rates were lower than expected, MI-BEST subsequently informed the development of a successful application to the Department of Labor's Workforce Innovation Fund for the Accelerating Career Employment (ACE) initiative for which Maryland joined three other states to test the effectiveness of ABE training combined with occupational skills training and industry certification.

In the ACE demonstration, six Maryland jurisdictions—including Baltimore City and Baltimore County—joined partners in Connecticut, Georgia, and Texas to implement model career-pathway programs that combined accelerated adult basic education and/or English language instruction with occupational skills training. For our purposes here, however, it's important to note that the Baltimore City site dropped the GED component based on the earlier MI-BEST experience and the time it took for participants to gain their high school diploma.

### One Baltimore for Jobs

Another local example of combining ABE instruction and skills training comes from recent work undertaken by the Mayor's Office of Employment Development. Using one-time funds from the U.S. Department of Labor for the One Baltimore for Jobs initiative (1B4J), MOED invested directly in 12 occupational skills training programs for unemployed and underemployed Baltimore City residents.

As part of 1B4J, MOED also issued sub-grants to adult education and literacy providers to work in concert with the funded programs and shore up the basic skills of adults engaged in occupational skills training. This was an intentional effort to support unemployed and underemployed city residents to:

- Obtain their high school diploma via the GED;
- Increase their reading and/or math skills at least two grade levels (for those with and without a high school diploma whose reading and/or math levels precluded their entrance into 1B4J-funded job-training programs).<sup>39</sup>

While the literacy grants did not achieve the desired outcomes, MOED notes "it was a significant first step. There were important lessons learned for future collaboration that are being applied today."<sup>40</sup>

### South Baltimore Learning Center

With grants from several local foundations, South Baltimore Learning Center is working with sector-specific training programs to combine adult literacy and GED preparation with occupational skills training. SBLC is currently partnering with the Jane Addams Resource Center manufacturing program, the JumpStart construction program, the BioTechnical Institute of Maryland, and Civic Works to concurrently enroll participants



While the 1B4J literacy grants did not achieve the desired outcomes, MOED notes "it was a significant first step. There were important lessons learned for future collaboration that are being applied today."

without a high school diploma in GED classes and technical skills training and to shore up the functional literacy of those in these occupational skills training programs who already have high school diplomas but are reading at levels below those required by their chosen occupation.

### Accelerated Programs

Seeking to improve results, several Baltimore providers have and continue to experiment with accelerated program models designed to more rapidly move participants to their diploma.

- An effort organized in 2013 by Baltimore Reads came at the same time that the organization was ceasing operations, yet initial data were promising. The program targeted students assessed at the Adult Secondary Level and provided an intensive nine-week class. Of the nine enrollees in the first class who sat for the GED exam, seven passed—a 78 percent pass rate.
- Strong City Baltimore's Adult Learning Center has recently implemented a six-week intensive class. Preliminary results show greater GED attainment and subject-test pass rates for students enrolled in the intensive class than for students in the traditional program.

### Restructuring at BCCC

Over the last year, new leadership in the Division of Workforce Development and Continuing Education at Baltimore City Community College has responded to declining enrollment and

disappointing results by taking a hard look at its adult education programs. This internal review has led to:

- The hiring of new staff to oversee and implement adult education programs;
- A restructuring of those programs to focus more clearly on the skills necessary to pass the GED using redesigned curricula and methods aligned with national guidelines;
- Ensuring all current adult education instructors are also certified teachers; and
- A commitment to ongoing professional development.

### Review of YO Centers

MOED has experimented with ways to increase participant retention and outcomes, including offering stipends for attendance at Youth Opportunity Centers. Further work is currently underway to review YO programming with the intent of accelerating educational attainment, employment, and earnings for enrollees.

### An Emphasis on Literacy in City Schools

Relevant to the discussion on low levels of academic readiness and literacy evidenced among residents seeking to gain their diploma as adults who had previously been students in the Baltimore City Public Schools, in 2017 City Schools developed a new blueprint to improve opportunities for success for all students. As one of three goals, "the blueprint

Given the heightened stakes for those without a high school diploma in the local labor market, a leadership body in Baltimore could provide direct support and incentives for program innovation.

emphasizes improving literacy achievement as the cornerstone of learning in all subjects and addressing the whole of students' needs and interests."<sup>41</sup>

In public agencies and in community-based and community college adult education programs in Baltimore, nascent innovation is underway through improvements in program design and delivery and with anticipated, but as yet unrealized, improvements in participant outcomes.

#### IV. Recommendations for Broader Consideration and Action

Program experimentation to improve outcomes for adult learners is underway. The school system is considering an effort to re-enroll school leavers as part of a broader effort to increase enrollment. Adult high schools are in development. Yet, overall diploma attainment rates remain very low even as the stakes for those without a diploma in the labor market have increased. How else might Baltimore's elected officials, policymakers, funders, and program operators move to accelerate the degree to which residents receive this most basic and most critical credential?

The following recommendations emerge from this review:

- **Mayor Pugh and the Baltimore City Council should move immediately to re-establish a leadership body dedicated to adult education and training and provide local funds to increase the number of adult residents with a high school diploma.**

The Philadelphia Office of Adult Education reports directly to the Mayor and organizes funding, professional development, and program assessment citywide. It also serves as the source for local innovation, has organized Philadelphia-based adult education programs into a network, and is experimenting with online instructional models.<sup>42</sup> Since the early days of Baltimore Reads, no city-level body has taken on this issue. City general funds that had been supporting adult education have since been directed elsewhere.

Given the heightened stakes for those without a high school diploma in the local labor market alongside low attainment rates to date, such a leadership body in Baltimore could provide direct support and incentives for program innovation tied to increased diploma attainment, track progress, advocate for increased—or at least restored—funding from the state and establish a local community of practice where providers could learn from one another. It could also deepen and strengthen the analysis begun here through direct conversations with adult learners about their needs and preferences.

- **Current adult education programs and their funders should ask themselves hard questions about the results documented in this paper and what they are willing to do differently to accelerate high school diploma receipt.** Action steps could include:
  - Increasing teacher training and professional development tied to best instructional practices and the rigors of the revised GED exam;

The fact that 35 percent of enrollees across the state who enter at 11th- and 12th-grade levels earn their diploma in a year, while only 21 percent of city enrollees at the same ABE level do, suggests considerable room for program improvement.

- Identifying and implementing model curricula and methods for adult learners;
- Reviewing and revising the scheduling of learning opportunities to increase flexibility for working adults and those with caregiving responsibilities;
- Developing feasible and fair cost models associated with effective practices to serve as the basis for future funding and advocacy;
- Deepening collaborations with occupational skills training programs for the delivery of contextualized ABE instruction that leads to both a high school diploma and an industry-recognized credential; and
- Focusing particular energy and attention on:
  - The high number of adult students who enter programs performing at intermediate and secondary levels but exit without gaining any skills or a diploma. The fact that 35 percent of enrollees across the state who enter at 11th- and 12th-grade levels earn their diploma in a year, while only 21 percent of city enrollees at the same ABE level do, suggests considerable room for program improvement;
  - The identification and amelioration of learning difficulties and delays and other social/emotional challenges that might be impeding the progress of adult learners; and
  - Effective methods and practices to improve diploma attainment among Hispanic

residents, a large percentage of whom have not completed high school.

- **While continuing a system-wide focus on improving literacy that will hopefully result in greater diploma attainment and post-secondary success over the long term, the leadership of Baltimore City Public Schools should move with urgency to put a priority emphasis on the return of young people ages 18-21 who have left school without graduating.** Such an effort could not only recruit those in this age group to return to school and earn both their diploma and a relevant career credential, but also help the system meet its enrollment goals. Per-student costs could be covered under regular state funding formulae for public education of those up to age 21.
 

City Schools should also continue to focus on effective ways to prevent students from dropping out in the first place, rendering the other recommendations in this report and less pressing over time.
- **The Mayor's Office of Employment Development should move with urgency to complete the review and restructuring of its YO Program to increase attendance, educational attainment, employment, and earnings among participants.** This program is largely funded with the City General Funds. What is the best and highest use of these funds for the city's out-of-school and out-of-work young people?

With a renewed focus on high school diploma attainment and attention to the items above, Baltimore's elected leadership, current program operators, and their funders should also work together to:

- **Urge the Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation (DLLR) to explore alternative pathways to a high school diploma.** DLLR manages and funds adult education programs in Maryland. Given changes in the format of the GED, some states are opting out of the exam and exploring alternative pathways to a high school diploma such as the HiSet (developed by Pearson's competitor, ETS) and TASC (the Test Assessing Secondary Completion). Other states offer all three options. The South Baltimore Learning Center's experience with the NEDP suggests it too should be examined for possible expansion, especially given its success with older learners.
- **Closely monitor and advocate for the continued development, implementation, and funding of adult high schools in Baltimore and Maryland.** Adult high schools, when coupled with public funding and program flexibility, have proven effective elsewhere. Initial work in Maryland is underway; however, given that there is no dedicated public funding and that students must meet traditional high school completion criteria, it remains to be seen how quickly these programs will open and how many more adults will receive their diplomas once programs are operating. Continued scrutiny and advocacy will be required to ensure that these schools reach their potential.
- **Increase accountability for performance.** At present, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of the broad array of organizations and programs at work on adult education and alternative high school

completion in Baltimore. Although program enrollment, demographic, and performance data from a variety of sources exist, when collected they offer just a partial view. There is no complete or consistent data set. Some community-based programs, not funded by DLLR, have no one to whom they report. Partial responsibility is borne by a number of agencies and organizations, yet no body is charged with the whole. A reinvigorated local leadership body could serve as the repository for enrollment and outcomes data, and make that information available to both city residents seeking to upgrade their skills and policymakers looking to understand what's working and what is not.

## Looking Ahead

Action on any one of these recommendations would accelerate progress: more action, greater progress. But one also wonders if—even when taken together—these recommendations are bold enough. If there isn't some bigger, broader effort that is just beyond current collective imagining. What if, say, Baltimore City Public Schools worked with the city's representatives in Annapolis to extend the age of public school enrollment beyond 21 to all city residents without a high school diploma? What if free evening classes for adults were made available—like they were for returning veterans after World War II—and were coupled with occupational skills training for in-demand jobs? What if the city's high schools were used for these courses and for a network of drop-in computer labs that supported adult learners with online programs and trained educators, tutors, and volunteers? What more could be accomplished if the education and up-skilling of adult city residents were put front and center?

By 2020, 69 percent of the jobs in Maryland will require a high school diploma and additional training. Nearly 81,000 Baltimore City residents

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over the age of 18 do not have the base credential necessary for success. Many enroll in adult education programs seeking to attain their high school diploma, but few complete. There is a \$7,000 difference in annual income between those with a high school diploma and those without. The lack of a high school diploma in Baltimore also reflects and further exacerbates the city's long struggle with disparate outcomes and curtailed life chances by race.

Clearly, the cost and consequences of non-completion are high.

The question remains: What is Baltimore willing to do about it?

### About the Author

Martha Holleman is a social policy analyst and consultant in Baltimore, Maryland. She holds a Masters of Arts in Policy Studies from the Johns Hopkins University, was a Distinguished Fellow of the WT Grant Foundation at New York University's Wagner School of Public Service, and served as the Senior Policy Advisor for Baltimore's Safe and Sound Campaign.

## Endnotes

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- 19** Baltimore City Bureau of the Budget and Management Research, *Fiscal Year 2019 Agency Detail: Recommendations to the Board of Estimates, Volume II, Mayor's Office of Employment Development Fiscal Year 2017 Actual and Fiscal Year 2018 Budget, Workforce Services for Out of School Youth*, page 176.
- 20** Key informant interview with Ernest Dorsey, Donnice Brown, Kerry Owens, and Joseph Dodson of the Mayor's Office of Employment Development, YO, and the Career Academy, October 2017.
- 21** Baltimore City Community College (BCCC), for example, reports an unduplicated enrollment of close to 6,000 students in its adult basic education programs annually. It reported data to DLLR on 1,059 participants in fiscal year 2018 that were directly supported by AEFLA and other state funds. For BCCC enrollment trends, see Baltimore City Community College 2018 Performance Accountability Report, September 2018, accessed at: <https://www.bccc.edu/cms/lib/MD02000050/Centricity/Domain/2122/BCCC%20Board-Approved%202018%20Performance%20Accountability%20Report%20-%20OIR%20Sept%2021%202018-2.pdf>.) Similarly, South Baltimore Learning Center provided services to close to 900 adults in fiscal year 2017; its DLLR reporting in that year covered 524 adults.
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## Acknowledgements

Over the long course of this paper's development, many, many people contributed their insights about and aspirations for improved outcomes for adult learners in Baltimore. The names of key informant interviewees are included as an appendix and make a partial list of those to whom the author is extremely grateful. Absent from this list, but also owed a debt of gratitude, are Melanie Styles, Sarah Manekin, Bonnie Legro and Bob Embry of the Abell Foundation who supported and encouraged this work and who do so much to surface questions and suggest solutions critical to expanding opportunities for city residents. Extra thanks also go to Douglas Weimer of DLLR, Patti Morfe of MOED, and Kelly Peddicord of the South Baltimore Learning Center who ran additional data reports, answered many persistent and pesky questions, and caught early mistakes in analysis and interpretation. Any errors that remain are, of course, the author's own.



## Appendix A: Key Informant Interviews

**Donnice Brown**, Out-of-School Youth Administrator, Career Development Services, Youth Services Division

**Melissa Desi**, Adult Education Program Specialist, Division of Workforce Development and Adult Education, Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation

**Ernest Dorsey**, Director, Youth Services Division, Mayor's Office of Employment Development

**Mary Eubanks**, GED Instructor, HEBCAC/Eastside Youth Opportunity Center

**Hathaway Ferebee**, Executive Director, Baltimore's Safe and Sound Campaign

**Michelle Frazier**, Division of Workforce Development and Adult Education, Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation (Retired)

**Terry Gilleland**, Director, Division of Workforce Development and Adult Education, Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation

**Diane Inverso**, Director, Philadelphia Office of Adult Education

**Jennifer Kobrin**, Philadelphia Office of Adult Education

**Pat Mikos**, Division of Workforce Development and Continuing Education, Baltimore City Community College

**Lois Mitchell**, Program Director, HEBCAC/Eastside Youth Opportunity Center (Retired)

**Naomie Nyanungo**, Philadelphia Office of Adult Education

**Cathleen O'Neal**, Assistant Director, Strong City Baltimore Adult Learning Center

**Kerry Owens, Program Manager**, Westside Youth Opportunity Center, Youth Services Division, Mayor's Office of Employment Development

**Grayla Reneau**, Division of Workforce Development and Adult Education, Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation

**Roger Shaw**, Director, Baltimore City Public Schools Re-Engagement Center

**Tanya Terrell**, Executive Director, South Baltimore Learning Center

**Meintje Westerbeeke**, Retired Director of English Language Services and Basic Skills, Baltimore City Community College

### Appendix B: Fiscal Year 2018 DLLR-Grants to Baltimore Programs by Fund Source

Grant Sources	Amount
Maryland Literacy Works	\$1,170,029
AEFLA Adult Basic Education	\$463,331
AEFLA Secondary Education	\$75,438
AEFLA Integrated English Literacy/ Civic Education	\$67,745
AEFLA/ Local Institutionalized	\$18,416
AEFLA FY 17 Leadership Carryover	\$41,568
AEFLA FY 18 Infrastructure Cost Allocations	\$13,315
National External Diploma Program	\$32,072
AEFLA National External Diploma Program	\$27,633
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$1,909,547</b>

Source: Author's compilation of Fiscal Year 2018 DLLR Notice of Grant Awards/ DLLR Account Code Information: Baltimore City Community College, South Baltimore Learning Center, and Strong City Baltimore

**Appendix C: South Baltimore Learning Center: Select Characteristics of Participants Receiving Diplomas via the GED and NEDP, Fiscal Year 2017**

Selected Characteristics	Attained Diploma via GED (n = 24)	Attained Diploma via NEDP (n = 25)
Average Age	30	41
% Female	71%	72%
% African-American	46%	76%
% White	46%	12%
Highest Grade Completed	10th	10th
Assessed Reading Level at Entry (grade)	5	4.5
Average Hours Spent	131	268

Source: South Baltimore Learning Center; analysis by author

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Adult High School Diploma Attainment in Baltimore: Status,  
Consequences, Opportunities, and Recommendations

By Martha Holleman  
March 2019

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