

# RECOMMENDATIONS TO CREATE A STANDARD ADULT HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA

Report of the  
Standard Adult High School Diploma Task Force  
*Minnesota Department of Education*  
*February 1, 2014*

# Table of Contents

Executive Summary .....	3
Introduction .....	3
Charge to the Task Force .....	5
Task Force Membership and Activities.....	5
The Task Force Recommendations .....	7
Appendix A: Statutory Language Establishing Task Force and Charge.....	10
Appendix B: Standard Adult High School Diploma Advisory Task Force Membership.....	12

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## **Executive Summary**

A standard adult high school diploma should be made available to Minnesota's adults through the Adult Basic Education (ABE) system. It should be developed and approved through additional statute language instead of rulemaking, due to the cost and time required in the rulemaking process.

The Minnesota Department of Education should create program requirements and an application process open to ABE consortia to approve these new standard adult high school diploma programs.

Upon approval, ABE consortia would develop local standard adult high school diploma programs that adhere to state policy and be subject to annual review and program approval that is renewed every five years. Local standard adult high school diploma programs would include individual advising and align to a set of common competencies that incorporate individual student goals and needs with state and national standards.

Adult students would have four different ways to demonstrate completion of the standard adult diploma program requirements: verified K-12 classes, postsecondary courses, and/or other approved trainings or experiences; test-verified knowledge; ABE instruction; and applied learning projects.

The standard adult high school diploma program should be structured with common records and transcripts to allow portability and transferability for students. Upon completion of a standard adult high school diploma program, students should receive a diploma and official transcript from the Minnesota Department of Education. In addition, school districts should have the option and be encouraged to grant a local diploma to standard adult high school diploma program graduates in their area.

To continue developing the standard adult high school diploma criteria and processes, the Minnesota Department of Education should provide technical assistance and work with a temporary working group and long-term advisory committee.

## **Introduction**

### **Serving Minnesota's Adults Needing Secondary Credentials**

According to the 2012 American Community Survey's five-year estimates, an estimated 285,839 Minnesotans over the age of 25 do not have a high school diploma or its equivalent. To serve adults needing secondary credentials and literacy instruction, Minnesota currently has an Adult Basic Education (ABE) system for individuals no longer participating in the K-12 system. Services are available through 46 consortia that cover the state geographically and include all school districts. Roughly 75,000 adults are served annually by Minnesota's ABE system. More than a third of Minnesota's ABE participants (36%) are English Language Learners.

This system is jointly funded and governed at the state and federal level. Federally, it is governed by Title II of the Workforce Investment Act, called the Adult Education and Family

Literacy Act. At the state level, it is governed by Minnesota statute. Minnesota's ABE system has been recognized by other states and national organizations for the quality of services provided in the areas of core literacy skills, academic and employment readiness skills, and technology skills.

## **Two Current Pathways Exist But Are Not Sufficient for All Adults**

Secondary credentials are important to adult success in postsecondary education, training and careers. Such credentials provide a gateway for entry into the workforce, to postsecondary education and to participate as active and contributing community members.

If an adult in Minnesota wants to earn a secondary credential or its equivalent, they currently have two choices: earning a high school diploma meeting current Minnesota graduation standards or earning a GED®. In the 2012-13 program year, 5,587 adults earned a GED® and 218 adults earned a high school diploma.

The option of earning a high school diploma works for adults who have most of their high school credits already completed when they enroll in the ABE program. For enrollees who have a substantial credit deficit, this option is typically not viable, because it is too time consuming for adult students and is not financially sustainable for ABE programs based on current system funding.

The option of earning a high school equivalency through the GED® has dramatically changed in 2014 with the launch of a new test that is entirely computer-based. This option works well for many adults, but does not work well for adults who struggle with a single high-stakes assessment or for those who do not have geographic access to the test due to the limited number of testing centers that currently exist in Minnesota.

## **Creating a Third Pathway for Adults to Earn a Secondary Credential**

A third option is needed for adults to earn a secondary credential: a competency-based diploma. Adults should have access to a standard adult diploma program that is tailored to adult learning needs and has sufficient rigor to ensure graduates have the skills needed to be successful in postsecondary education and careers. This standard adult high school diploma option should include essential competency domains that measure academic, career development and employability skills.

As the current statute states [Minn. Stat. § 124D.52, Subd. 8], the standard adult high school diploma program should serve adults that are no longer eligible for K-12 services provided by their local district. The standard adult high school diploma program should be designed for and effectively serve the diverse adults in Minnesota needing a secondary credential. This includes English language learners, single parents, people living in poverty, and other adults who were not able to complete high school and earn a recognized secondary credential due to various circumstances. Adults that may not be ready to master content in the standard adult high school diploma program can access Adult Basic Education programming services available throughout the state, preparing for future participation in standard adult high school diploma programming.

## Charge to the Task Force

The duties of the task force were to review "Minnesota Adult Secondary Credential: a Student Strategy for Workforce Readiness and Individual Prosperity," a report submitted in 2012 by the Minnesota Adult Secondary Credential Task Force [convened by Literacy Action Network<sup>1</sup>], and other relevant materials; and then to develop specific criteria to be used in awarding the new adult diploma.

## Task Force Membership and Activities

The task force consisted of nine members as designated in statute (see appendix B). The commissioner of education was to appoint representatives from the specific organizations to the task force by July 1, 2013:

- (1) One employee of the Department of Education with expertise in adult basic education.
- (2) Five administrators and teachers with expertise in development of education curriculum from local adult basic education programs located in rural, suburban, and urban areas of the state, at least one of whom represents the Literacy Action Network.
- (3) One employee of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities with expertise in Adult Basic Education.
- (4) One employee of the Department of Employment and Economic Development with expertise in Adult Basic Education and employment.
- (5) One member of the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce familiar with Adult Basic Education programs under Minnesota Statutes, section 124D.52.

The task force was not appointed nor was able to meet until August because of the state requirements to utilize the open appointments process. This required the development of an application with the Secretary of State's office and meeting required timelines allowing people to be notified and to apply. The application deadline was August 2, 2013, well after the statutory requirement.

The Task Force held seven meetings between August 23, 2013, and January 24, 2014. At its final meeting the recommendations included with this report were finalized and adopted unanimously.

The Task Force reviewed existing adult diploma programs and models for delivery from other states. Task force members researched policies, standards and materials and interviewed state adult diploma specialists from Connecticut, Vermont, Washington and Wisconsin. In addition, they talked with a variety of experts and reviewed state and national standards relevant to adult learners: Minnesota's K-12 graduations standards; the National External Diploma Program (NEDP), which is maintained by CASAS, the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment

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<sup>1</sup> Literacy Action Network is a statewide professional membership organization whose mission is to develop, improve, and expand adult literacy services by coordinating legislative advocacy, fostering statewide collaboration, and supporting quality ABE in Minnesota. More information can be found at their [website](http://www.literacyactionnetwork.org) (www.literacyactionnetwork.org).

System; the Academic, Career, and Employability Skills (ACES) Transitions Integration Framework, which was developed by practitioners in Minnesota’s Adult Basic Education system; the College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education, which are drawn from the Common Core State Standards; and the Northstar Digital Literacy Standards.

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## **The Task Force Recommendations**

### **Recommendation 1: Statute Change rather than Rulemaking**

Enacting a statute that includes these recommendations would enable programming to begin sooner and allow programs to respond more quickly to the educational needs of adults lacking a secondary credential. It would also be more cost-effective than pursuing rulemaking, estimated at 18 months minimum. The statutory changes should include the recommendations below.

### **Recommendation 2: MDE Approval**

The Minnesota Department of Education should establish specific requirements and develop a process for application approval, including means to assure effective instruction for adult learners in Standard Adult Diploma Programs. The commissioner should create criteria based on quality, scope, and reasonableness when evaluating applications from ABE consortia. Competencies covered in the adult diploma program model should be rigorous and be consistent throughout the state while aligning to Minnesota high school standards pertinent to adult learners and their needs.

### **Recommendation 3: Adult Basic Education (ABE) Consortia to Establish Programs for MDE Approval**

Only state-designated ABE consortia should be able to develop Standard Adult Diploma Programs as part of their comprehensive ABE program, detailing these in applications to the Minnesota Department of Education.

### **Recommendation 4: Program Requirements**

Authority to operate a Standard Adult Diploma Program should be contingent upon successful completion of application and operational requirements established by the commissioner and as identified in policy. Standard Adult Diploma Programs should be required to submit evaluative and longitudinal data to the Minnesota Department of Education annually as part of the adult basic education application. ABE consortia should resubmit their Standard Adult Diploma Program applications as part of each consortium's five-year narrative application. The state may limit the number and size of Standard Adult Diploma Programs within a consortium to be consistent with community need, program size, funding, and other resources.

### **Recommendation 5: Individual Advising**

Prior to admission to a Standard Adult Diploma Program, each adult applicant should be required to participate in an initial orientation and advising session with the local program to: identify learning goals; assess individual skills and experience to identify competencies that have already been completed; identify potential career pathway(s) goals and options; and identify instructional needs using career and postsecondary preparation assessments. From this information, local programs should be required to work with the student to develop an individualized learning plan based on the student's identified goals and skills.

Local standard adult diploma programs should be required to provide on-going advising and monitoring with adult diploma students to implement the individualized learning plan, track progress toward diploma goals and provide additional support services as needed.

Local standard adult diploma programs should be required to conduct a final advising session for adult diploma students that both evaluates their work to ensure completion of necessary competencies and requirements and provides assistance with their transition to postsecondary education, training and/or careers.

### **Recommendation 6: Common Competencies**

Competencies, skills and knowledge requirements should be established in the following areas:

- A. Language arts, which includes reading, writing, speaking and listening.
- B. Mathematics.
- C. Career development and employability skills.
- D. Other areas, like social studies and science, based on specific educational and career goals as identified in individual student learning plans.

### **Recommendation 7: Demonstrating Completion of Requirements**

The commissioner should allow standard adult high school diploma program students to demonstrate completion of the requirements in a variety of ways and at a minimum allow local programs to include:

- A. Verification of prior experiences such as K-12 classes, postsecondary courses, ABE instruction, and other approved experiences that are demonstrated to align with the competency domains.
- B. Verified knowledge and skills measured by an approved standardized assessment for high schools, secondary credentials, ABE programs and/or postsecondary entrance exams.
- C. ABE instruction and course completion.
- D. Applied learning through contextualized projects and other approved methods.

### **Recommendation 8: Portability**

The standard adult high school diploma program should allow students the opportunity to continue their studies and not have to start over or repeatedly demonstrate progress on the same competencies if they move or transfer to another approved standard adult high school diploma program within Minnesota.

### **Recommendation 9: Transferability (Student Records)**

The department should establish a format for maintaining and transferring adult student records.

An ABE consortium that receives approval to offer standard adult high school diploma programming should be required to maintain a permanent individual student record that is

consistent with requirements established by the commissioner. They must provide transcripts to other ABE consortia, employers, postsecondary institutions, or other entities upon request by the student.

### **Recommendation 10: Diploma Granting**

The commissioner of education should have the authority to issue a Minnesota Standard Adult High School Diploma and provide transcripts for any individual who has satisfied the requirements. In addition, an ABE Consortia with an approved and operating standard adult high school diploma program may work with a participating local school district to issue a district diploma to any individual who has satisfied the adult diploma requirements.

### **Recommendation 11: Advisory Committee**

The commissioner should establish an advisory committee of state and local ABE practitioners and leaders to provide guidance on standard adult high school diploma policies, review local programs and program applications, and help develop accountability measures to ensure high-quality standards and implementation are maintained on an ongoing basis.

### **Recommendation 12: Adult Basic Education Working Group**

The department should immediately convene a working group to develop a detailed implementation plan for the standard adult high school diploma program. Specifically, the working group should more clearly articulate competency domain criteria, processes for verifying competency completion, and other implementation process needs. This working group should be comprised of state and local Adult Basic Education practitioners in various roles, including administrators and instructors.

### **Recommendation 13: Department Assistance**

The department should provide technical assistance to ABE consortia in developing and evaluating standard adult high school diploma programming.

# Appendix A: Statutory Language Establishing Task Force and Charge

2013 Session -- Chapter 116 Article 2: Sec. 18

## STANDARD ADULT HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA ADVISORY TASK FORCE.

**Subdivision 1. Establishment.** The commissioner of education shall appoint a nine-member advisory task force to recommend programmatic requirements for adult basic education programs of instruction leading to a standard adult high school diploma under Minnesota Statutes, section 124D.52, subdivision 8.

**Subd. 2. Membership.** The commissioner of education must appoint representatives from the following organizations to the task force by July 1, 2013:

- (1) one employee of the Department of Education with expertise in adult basic education;
- (2) five administrators and teachers with expertise in development of education curriculum from local adult basic education programs located in rural, suburban, and urban areas of the state, at least one of whom represents the Literacy Action network;
- (3) one employee of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities with expertise in adult basic education;
- (4) one employee of the Department of Employment and Economic Development with expertise in adult basic education and employment; and
- (5) one member of the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce familiar with adult basic education programs under Minnesota Statutes, section 124D.52.

**Subd. 3. Duties.** The duties of the task force shall include:

- (1) reviewing "Minnesota Adult Secondary Credential: a Student Strategy for Workforce Readiness and Individual Prosperity," a report submitted in 2012 by the Minnesota Adult Secondary Task Force, and other relevant materials; and
- (2) developing specific criteria to be used in awarding the new adult diploma.

**Subd. 4. First meeting.** The commissioner of education must convene the first meeting of the task force by August 1, 2013.

**Subd. 5. Chair.** The commissioner shall appoint a chair.

**Subd. 6. Assistance.** The commissioner, upon request, must provide technical assistance to task force members.

**Subd. 7. Report.** By February 1, 2014, the task force must submit its recommendations to the commissioner of education for providing a standard adult high school diploma to persons who are not eligible for kindergarten through grade 12 services, who do not have a high school diploma, and who successfully complete an approved adult basic education program of instruction necessary to earn an adult high school diploma. The commissioner must consider these recommendations when adopting rules under Minnesota Statutes, section 124D.52, subdivision 8.

**Subd. 8. Sunset.** The task force sunsets the day after submitting its report under subdivision 7, or February 2, 2014, whichever is earlier.

**EFFECTIVE DATE.** This section is effective the day following final enactment.

**Sec. 17. Minnesota Statutes 2012, section 124D.52, is amended by adding a subdivision to read:**

**Subd. 8. Standard high school diploma for adults.** (a) The commissioner shall adopt rules for providing a standard adult high school diploma to persons who:

- (1) are not eligible for kindergarten through grade 12 services;
- (2) do not have a high school diploma; and
- (3) successfully complete an adult basic education program of instruction approved by the commissioner of education necessary to earn an adult high school diploma.

(b) Persons participating in an approved adult basic education program of instruction must demonstrate the competencies, knowledge, and skills sufficient to ensure that postsecondary programs and institutions and potential employers regard persons with a standard high school diploma and persons with a standard adult high school diploma as equally well prepared and qualified graduates. Approved adult basic education programs of instruction under this subdivision must issue a standard adult high school diploma to persons who successfully demonstrate the competencies, knowledge, and skills required by the program.

**EFFECTIVE DATE.** This section is effective July 1, 2014.

## **Appendix B: Standard Adult High School Diploma Advisory Task Force Membership**

### **Chair**

**Karen Wolters**, Transitions Coordinator  
Mankato Area Adult Basic Education

### **Members**

**Jim Colwell**, State GED Administrator  
Minnesota Department of Education

**Karen Hynick**, System Director of P20 and College Readiness  
Minnesota State Colleges and Universities

**Kristine Kelly**, ABE Teacher/Trainer  
Robbinsdale

**Judy Mortrude**, State Program Administrator  
Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development

**Kate Ronald**, Director Volunteers of America Adult High School  
VOA Education Center  
Minneapolis, MN 55404

**Tamra Sieve**, Metro South Adult Basic Education Director and Principal of Metro South ALP High School; Metro South Adult Basic Education, Bloomington Schools

**Amy Walstien**, Director, Education Policy  
Minnesota Chamber of Commerce

### **Minnesota Department of Education Staff**

**Rose Hermodson**, Assistant to the Commissioner

**Todd Wagner**, Adult Basic Education Director

**Brad Hasskamp**, Adult Basic Education Policy and Operations Specialist

[Find all Task Force materials on the MDE website.](http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Welcome/AdvBCT/StandultHighSchDiplTaskForce/index.html)

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