





**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

# Building on the GED

## **Promising Results from a Bridge-to-College Model**

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# OVERVIEW

Bridge-to-college programs aim to help people complete high school and enroll in postsecondary education, two milestones that increase access to economic opportunity. These programs help students obtain their high school credentials while encouraging postsecondary transition and success.

Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC) in Green Bay, Wisconsin, implemented a bridge-to-college program in 2015 to help more students earn their GED credentials and transition to postsecondary education. This GED Bridge program had three components that distinguished it from NWTC's traditional GED class, called GED Prep 2: (1) a NWTC-developed "contextualized" curriculum — one that focused on original texts and materials related to specific careers (to build students' academic skills and raise their awareness of those careers) — in contrast to GED Prep 2 classes that focused on GED test preparation materials; (2) individual support to help students plan their transition to postsecondary education, plus career exploration and transition planning in class; and (3) managed cohort enrollment, meaning that students started each class section together, in contrast to the open enrollment of the GED Prep 2 class where new students could enroll at any time.

This report describes an evaluation of NWTC's GED Bridge program that included impact, implementation, and cost analyses. The impact analysis employed a random assignment design. Eligible applicants were randomly assigned to either the GED Bridge class or the GED Prep 2 class and followed for 18 months. The research team used administrative data to measure differences in class attendance and persistence, GED testing and completion, and enrollment in postsecondary education.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Students in the GED Bridge classes generally received the contextualized curriculum, managed cohort enrollment, and enhanced planning and support for transition to postsecondary education. These experiences differed from those of students in the traditional GED Prep classes, though they differed to varying degrees from semester to semester.
- Students assigned to the GED Bridge program had significantly higher rates of GED class attendance and attended those classes over a longer period.
- GED Bridge group students were more likely to earn GEDs and enroll in college courses. GED Bridge increased the percentage of students who earned GEDs by 11.7 percentage points and increased enrollment into college courses by 8.5 percentage points.
- As implemented at NWTC, the GED Bridge program was more expensive than GED Prep 2 and was not as cost-effective (meaning it did not result in a lower cost per GED credential earned). Its higher costs were in part a result of how NWTC staffed the GED programs and enrolled students, which resulted in more experienced teachers in GED Bridge classes and smaller student-teacher ratios. Students in GED Bridge also stayed in the program longer and received transition support not available to GED Prep 2 students, which increased costs.

This evaluation contributes to a small but growing body of research that suggests that bridge-to-college programs may be effective in improving both GED completion and postsecondary enrollment.



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The Authors





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Most jobs require at least a high school diploma or equivalent, and those that do not are mainly low-wage jobs with few opportunities for advancement.<sup>1</sup> An estimated 10 percent of the U.S. population over age 25 lack a high school credential.<sup>2</sup> People without high school degrees make less on average than those of all other education levels and have the highest unemployment rates.<sup>3</sup>

Given these statistics, many states and cities focus their education policies on increasing high school completion rates, and also postsecondary enrollment and completion rates. One pathway to high school completion is a high school equivalency diploma. The General Educational Development credential, or GED, can open access to postsecondary programs that require a high school diploma. However, alternative diploma holders have not typically made the transition to postsecondary education at the same rate as traditional high school graduates.<sup>4</sup> Extensive research finds that GED holders fare only marginally better in the labor market than people who do not complete high school.<sup>5</sup> Developing better programs to help these adult learners earn high school equivalency credentials and make a successful transition to postsecondary education has the potential to advance this group on pathways to quality jobs — ones that offer living wages, benefits, and opportunities for advancement — and self-sufficiency.

One approach, bridge-to-college programs, seeks to help students complete high school and begin postsecondary enrollment by simultaneously helping them obtain their high school credentials while providing support to encourage transitions to and success in postsecondary education. This report, prepared by MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization, describes an evaluation of one bridge-to-college program at Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC) in Green Bay, Wisconsin; the program aimed to help students earn their GEDs and continue to postsecondary

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- 1 In 2016, 28 percent of jobs required no educational credential, including retail and custodial jobs. See Bureau of Labor Statistics, “37 Percent of May 2016 Employment in Occupations Typically Requiring Postsecondary Education” (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, 2017).
  - 2 U.S. Census Bureau, “Educational Attainment in the United States: 2018” (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).
  - 3 Elka Torpey, “Data on Display: Measuring the Value of Education” (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, 2018).
  - 4 Each state has its own requirements for high school equivalency tests. The GED is the most common test, available in 40 states. The High School Equivalency Test (HiSET) is available in 23 states, and the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC) is available in 15 states. The National External Diploma Program is the least common test, available in only 6 states. Brian Smith and C.T. Turner, “GED Program Update: How to Thrive in this New WIOA World” (website: [www.GEDtestingservice.com](http://www.GEDtestingservice.com), 2018); Educational Testing Service, “2017 Annual Statistical Report on the HiSET Exam” (website: <http://hiset.ets.org>, 2017); Test Assessing Secondary Completion, “2015 Annual Statistical Report” (Maple Grove, MN: Data Recognition Corporation, 2016); National External Diploma Program, *The NEDP: Yearly Statistical Report* (San Diego, CA: CASAS, 2016).
  - 5 James Joseph Heckman, John Eric Humphries, and Nicholas S. Mader, “The GED” (Bonn, Germany: IZA Institute of Labor Economics, 2010).

education. The findings from this evaluation contribute to a small but growing body of research that suggests that bridge-to-college programs may be effective in improving both GED completion and postsecondary enrollment rates.

## THE GED BRIDGE TO COLLEGE PROGRAM AT NWTC

NWTC offers adult basic education classes in addition to college and occupational training classes. Beginning in 2015, NWTC developed a new bridge-to-college curriculum for its GED preparation classes, called GED Bridge to College and Careers. The new program was inspired by a similar one at LaGuardia Community College in New York City that had already shown evidence of success.<sup>6</sup> This class had three components that distinguished it from NWTC’s traditional GED classes, called GED Prep 2:

1. The GED Bridge class used a NWTC-developed “contextualized” curriculum — one that focused on original texts and materials related to specific careers (to build students’ academic skills and raise their awareness of those careers) — in contrast to GED Prep 2 classes, which focused on GED test-preparation materials.
2. GED Bridge students received individual support to help them plan their transition to postsecondary education, plus career exploration and transition planning in class, which were not available to GED Prep 2 students.
3. The GED Bridge class implemented managed cohort enrollment, meaning that students started each seven-week class section together, in contrast to the open enrollment of the GED Prep 2 class where new students could enroll at any time.

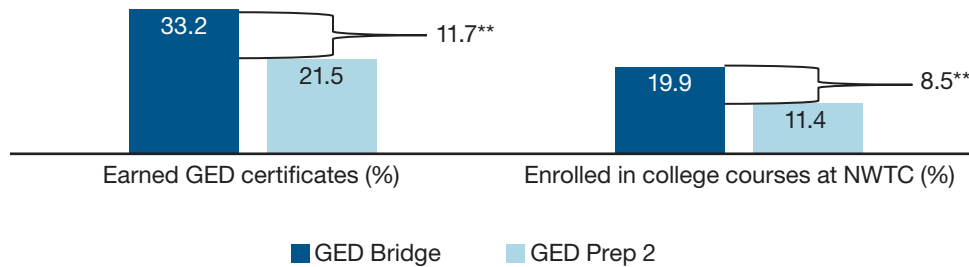
## EVALUATION AND RESULTS

To test the effectiveness of the GED Bridge class, MDRC randomly assigned eligible applicants to NWTC’s GED classes to either the GED Bridge class (the GED Bridge group) or the GED Prep 2 class (the GED Prep 2 group), and followed their results for 18 months. The study tracked rates of GED attainment and enrollment into postsecondary education at NWTC. The GED Bridge group students attended GED classes, earned GED credentials, and enrolled in college classes at significantly higher rates than the GED Prep 2 group: Figure ES.1 shows that 11.7 percentage points more students assigned to the GED Bridge class earned their GEDs (33.2 percent for GED Bridge group students compared with 21.5 percent for GED Prep 2 group students). GED Bridge group students enrolled in college courses at a higher rate as well: 19.9 percent of GED Bridge group students took college courses, compared with 11.4 percent of GED Prep 2 group students — a 75 percent difference.

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6 For results from the LaGuardia study, see Vanessa Martin and Joseph Broadus, *Enhancing GED Instruction to Prepare Students for College and Careers: Early Success in LaGuardia Community College’s Bridge to Health and Business Program* (New York: MDRC, 2013).

**FIGURE ES.1** Percentage of Students Who Earned GED Certificates or Enrolled in College Courses at NWTC



SOURCE: Calculations based on administrative data from NWTC.

NOTES: Statistical significance levels are indicated as: \*\*\* = 1 percent; \*\* = 5 percent; \* = 10 percent.

Results in this table are regression-adjusted, controlling for pre-random assignment characteristics.

Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in calculating sums and differences.

The total sample of 340 students includes 169 students in GED Bridge and 171 students in GED Prep 2.

The GED Bridge program’s costs were higher than those of the GED Prep 2 classes. An analysis found that those higher costs could be attributed to lower staff-to-student ratios for GED Bridge, higher instructional costs from using more experienced staff members to teach the GED Bridge classes, staffing for transition support, and longer persistence in the program by GED Bridge group members.

These findings, combined with results from the earlier study at LaGuardia, suggest that elements of these bridge-to-college programs — primarily a contextualized curriculum, cohort enrollment, and focused support for postsecondary transitions — can boost persistence in GED classes, GED completion rates, and postsecondary enrollment rates. These findings now apply to the small share of GED classes that take place on college campuses, but these lessons can also be instructive for program operators seeking to improve the community-based GED preparation classes that are more prevalent. More broadly, the findings in this report align with recent federal and state policies that encourage these approaches, and with other research that has found that integrating basic skills classes with instruction on college and career readiness can improve outcomes for adult learners.<sup>7</sup>

7 See, for example, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, Public Law 113-128. (U.S. Statutes at Large, 2014); Matthew Zeidenberg, Sung-Woo Cho, and Davis Jenkins, *Washington State’s Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training Program (I-BEST): New Evidence of Effectiveness* (New York: Columbia University, 2010).



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- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
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