

Student and Program Experience with the TASC Exam: Summary of December 2014 and January 2015 Survey

Conducted by the NYCCAL¹ HSE Working Group

Until 2011, the non-profit American Council on Education (ACE) owned and operated the GED® test and contracted with New York State and other states to offer the GED® exam. In March of 2011, ACE joined with Pearson VUE to remake the GED Testing Service as a for-profit entity. The New York State Regents, concerned about the higher cost of the GED® exam, as well as “changes in the administration and content of the GED® test scheduled to begin in January 2014”² directed the New York State Education Department to issue a competitive RFP process to seek an alternative to the GED®. Through that process, CTB-McGraw Hill was selected to develop a new exam, and in January 2014, a new HSE assessment, Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC), was introduced in New York State.

Given the widely felt concern about the implications of the introduction of a new HSE exam, NYCCAL made the decision to conduct a Survey of adult literacy programs to learn how students were doing on the new TASC. The Survey was distributed widely to the adult literacy field, and practitioners were encouraged to provide information on their experience with the new TASC. Program participation was fairly broad and included 28 CBO’s, two Educational Opportunity Centers (EOC’s), one CUNY College, a SUNY program, and two union programs. There were no responses from the NYC DOE, the largest of the adult literacy providers in New York City.

In total, 36 surveys were received. Two agencies submitted data twice on the same program. Those agencies were contacted and identified which entry to be included in the data. Another agency submitted two entries for two separate HSE programs, and both were included in the Survey. Three agencies responded, but did not offer HSE preparation. Thus, what follows is a summary and analysis of the information provided by 30 agencies on 31 unique adult literacy programs. A listing of all the programs that responded appears at the end of the report. With regard to data contained in this report, programs were asked to answer questions to the best of their ability, and to approximate numbers where exact figures were not readily available.

Question. 1. Does your program prepare students for the HSE Exam?

Three programs reported that they do not prepare students for the exam. These agencies simply recorded their contact information as requested in the instructions.

¹New York City Coalition on Adult Literacy

² News release of March 7, 2013 from the New York State Education Department

Only programs that provide HSE preparation responded to questions 2 – 13.
The following summarizes their responses:

Question 2. How many students are you currently preparing for the HSE exam?

For the 31 programs that provide HSE preparation, survey responses varied from a low of 1 to a high of 200. Six programs prepared between 100 and 200 students. Ten programs prepared between 50 and 100 students, and fifteen programs prepared under 50 students. The overall total number of students being prepared for the HSE exam at the time of the Survey was 1,846.

Question 3. Is your program a HSE Testing Site?

Twelve responded “Yes” and thirteen indicated “No”. Even though programs with testing centers may have tested students from outside their programs, they were asked, for purposes of this Survey, only to report on students prepared for the HSE exam by their program.

Question 4. How many students have you referred to the TASC exam since it was introduced in January of 2014?

Programs reported referrals for a total of 1,345 students. Five programs reported referring 100 or more students, five referred 50 or more students, and twenty-one referred between zero and 45 students.

Question 5. How many students received test results?

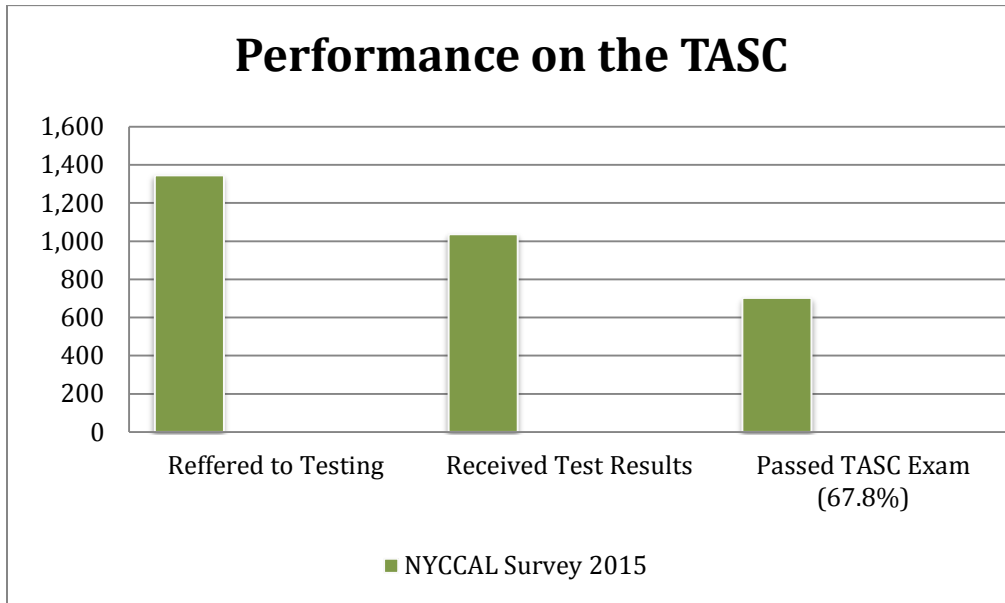
Programs were asked to report on the number of students who had been referred for testing, and of that number, how many had received test results. Of the 1,345 referred for testing, programs reported receiving results for 1,037 students or 77% of those tested.

Question 6. How long did it take to receive test results?

While responses varied, the majority of the 31 respondents said that they received results within 4-8 weeks. One program said it took 6-12 weeks, and another said there were “too many delays”. As noted in the comments section at the end of the Survey, one program said it had not received any results for the entire 2014 year, that they had received results for another agency’s test candidates, and could not get McGraw Hill to respond to several requests to correct the error. Overall, however, the timeliness of results did not seem to be a problem; it was not mentioned in any other of the narrative responses elicited by the Survey where respondents were free to comment on any issues or concerns related to the TASC. When a draft of the results of this Survey was presented to the HSE Working group of NYCCAL, participants said that the response time for results improved considerably in the latter part of 2014.

Question 7. How many students passed the test?

Programs were asked how many of the students they had prepared in their programs, and subsequently referred for testing, had passed the TASC. Programs reported that a total of 703, or 67.8%, of the 1,037 test takers whose results were received had passed the exam. This figure is slightly higher than the 60% pass rate for NYC students who came from preparation programs in 2009 and is on par with the 66% statewide performance for that same year³.



Question 8. Of those referred for testing, how many had taken the old GED?

As mentioned above, programs were asked for the approximate number of students referred to the TASC who had previously tested on the old GED. Programs reported that 373 or 53% of the 703 students who passed the TASC had previously tested on the old GED version.

Question 9. How many students referred for testing failed because they did not complete the exam?

It was reported that of the 334 candidates who failed the exam, only 22 or 6.5% did so because they did not complete the exam. 17 programs indicated that no one had failed as a result of not completing the exam, four reported only one person as not completing, three more reported that 2 students each had failed because of incompleting. One program reported that it didn't know the answer to the question, four wrote "not applicable", and the remaining two programs reported 9 and 4 candidates respectively who had failed because of incompleting of the exam. It's evident from the response to this question that incompleting of the exam was not an issue for the large majority of programs responding to this Survey. Prior to the

³ January 2011 memo to the NYS Regents
<http://www.regents.nysed.gov/meetings/2011Meetings/January2011/111p12accesd1.pdf>

introduction of the new exam, a lot of practitioners expressed concern that the anticipated difficulty of the exam would prompt many students to quit before completion. Even more interesting is that in the commentary offered in response to question #13, virtually every program commented on the fact that students found the exam very difficult, and that many who had actually passed initially assumed that they had failed. And yet, students, for the most part, persisted in completing the exam. This may be in large part due to program staff preparing students in advance for the anticipated difficulty, and counseling them not to quit.

Question 10. How many students failed as a result of failing only one subject?

The data provided here are problematic. An earlier part of the Survey indicates that 334 candidates failed the test. However, programs reported a total of 358 students failing because they failed only one subject. That figure is 24 points above the total number failing. The only thing to take away from this response is that program staff members seem confident that many students are failing the test because they are not passing one subject area. The results of this question will have to await analysis of complete data by McGraw Hill or the NYS Education Department.

Question 11. If students failed by one subject, was there a particular subject they most often failed?

The large majority of programs, 26, said “yes” in response to this question. Two responded “no”, and 3 said they didn’t know.

As a follow-up to question 11, respondents were asked which subject or subjects students were most often failing?

Responses were as follows: Math was identified by 11 programs; writing and math together identified by 13 programs, and writing, math and science together identified by 2 programs. One of the agencies that indicated they “didn’t know” if students had failed because of a particular subject, then went on to single out “reading” in response to this follow-up question. Even though programs did not single out “reading” by in large as the subject students would be most likely to fail, the commentary in question #13 notes the difficulty for students of being able to digest large amounts of reading in a short period of time.

Question 12. Generally speaking, have you been administering the TASC Readiness Exam?

In response to this question, the large majority of programs, 25, say they use the Readiness Exam, and the remaining 6 say they do not use it.

As a follow-up question, programs were asked to evaluate how effective a measure the Readiness Test is?

Programs were asked to rate, on a scale of 1-5, whether or not they think the Readiness exam is a good or poor predictor of success on the TASC Exam where 1 indicates that it is a good predictor and 5 that it is not. This question

yielded mixed results. Seven programs simply wrote “no” to indicate the Exam was not a good predictor without using the rating scale. One person gave it a rating of 1, five programs rated its predictability with a 2. Eleven programs gave a rating of 3, six programs gave a rating of 4, and the remaining program gave it a 5. It’s clear from the program responses to this question that the Readiness exam is not viewed as a strongly reliable predictor of success on the TASC. However, it is difficult to know without further follow-up with individual programs, in what ways programs are actually using the Readiness Exam. The Exam instructions indicate that programs not recommend students to the TASC unless they achieve 51% on the Readiness exam. Whether or not programs are following this guideline, or using a different measure, might affect the usefulness of the Readiness Exam. Similarly, the GED Practice Test, used as a predictor for the old GED Exam, yielded mixed results for programs.

Question 13. Provide comments that teachers or other staff might have regarding what students are saying about their experience with the TASC exam.

The issues most often identified in response to this question were:

- Students experienced the exam, and especially the math and writing, as extremely challenging, and many were surprised, in retrospect, that they had passed particular subjects or the exam itself.
- Students felt there was too much reading on the test overall and not enough time to finish reading the material or to adequately digest it.
- Students felt that a lot of the content on the exam was not familiar to them and did not appear on the Readiness exam.
- Resource materials are not adequate to prepare students or teachers for the exam, and particularly for the math exam.
- The experience of the difficulty of the exam causes a great deal of anxiety and anguish for students.
- Both students and staff want to know how to better interpret the Readiness Exam test scores.
- An agency serving the blind reports that the TASC Readiness test is only in regular print so only students who can use a CCTV to read can take it. Additionally, the agency reports that the “2014 audio CD is not descriptive enough to fairly administer this version”.
- Students who need a HSE diploma for work say they don’t have the time to digest all of the new content material necessary to pass the TASC while at the same time fulfilling family and work responsibilities.

The following is a verbatim listing of all comments submitted by respondents to the Survey.

1. Too much content to know. "I can't learn all of this in the short time I am a student at Grace Outreach".

2. They are shocked at the difficulty and unfamiliarity of the math questions. They say that none of the math was taught in class-surprisingly some of these critics passed the math.

Nobody has complained about the reading or social studies. One person who only failed math and science stated that the math on the science was the reason she failed science.

Most who fail one section only fail math; the others (with the exception noted above), fail the math and the writing

3. Most say the math and writing portion is difficult.
4. Several students have noted large discrepancies between the content that shows up on the actual math and social studies sub-tests versus the predictor content in those areas.

Almost all students who took the HSE exam in 2013 or earlier remarked that the math on TASC looked almost nothing like the math on GED. Far more advanced. Algebra-heavy. Few opportunities to earn points in arithmetic.

5. The TASC test is difficult. Math and writing are difficult. There is a lot of reading. The passages are long and sometimes they run out of time to answer all the questions.
6. Some of the students find that there are areas on the exam that is not covered in class and or on the Readiness test.
7. The exam is hard. The math is bananas. I don't understand any of it, never seen this math before. The reading was long MISS. I didn't understand some of da social studies. I didn't have time enough to write a whole essay. I took a guess on the revising writing questions cause I had to finish my essay.
8. Students report it is very difficult, and filled with questions they didn't study for. They report it's tough to be persistent through the whole test. In particular, the longer they wait for results, the more students dwell on the test difficulty, and the more they lose heart about their educational path.
9. It's very hard. They are surprised they passed. They guessed a lot. Reading is too long. Felt like they didn't know any of it but passed. The writing test took a lot longer than previous exam.
10. Students and staff want to know how to interpret the TASC Readiness test scores better.
11. Nothing to report.
12. Students say it's very, very hard. Tears are not uncommon. Counseling after the test is not uncommon. Students sometimes say "That's not what we studied!"
13. They usually remark about how difficult the math exam is. Some have found the essay especially difficult.
14. A few students took the computer based exam and said that for some portions of the exam they did not realize until it was too late that there were additional tabs or materials that they were supposed to click on and read before answering questions

15. Students must be ready to take the writing and math subjects or they may not pass the exam.
16. We haven't sent many students thus far because we only had short summer session and one class of students. We have been fairly successful 6 out of 10 passed with the other 4 just missing one section. Those 4 have since retested and passed that section. The students have all let us know that the test is very difficult and that it covers content that we weren't able to cover in class with the Common Core achieve text books.
17. Students state that the math is extremely difficult, citing examples of trigonometry on the test battery. Students state that the writing prompt is difficult and overwhelming with having to compare two separate documents. It is a lot of reading. There is a lot of pressure to finish the tests on time.
18. Students come out of the test jilted. They find the exam very difficult, and it takes a toll on them mentally, even when we tell them much of the stuff on the exam they won't know and won't be expected to get right. The math is very difficult, includes lots of Trig which we do not often cover in HSE classes. There is a lot of reading. Many students feel they have to skim the reading passages rather than read them thoroughly otherwise they would not have time to finish the test. There was a lot to read during the writing exam as well.
19. It is too much and too little time.
20. Lighthouse Guild serves those who are blind. The TASC Readiness test is only in regular print so only students who can use a CCTV to read can take it. Additionally, we were told by McGraw Hill that they had no imminent plans to make available a Readiness exam in an accessible format for our constituency such as an audio version or large print version. Could not administer the TASC test this year as the students who would likely be ready to test are audio testers only and the 2014 audio CD is not descriptive enough to fairly administer this version. Currently in contact with NYSED, NYS Commission for the Blind, and McGraw Hill.
21. There is a dire need for better preparation materials for the students. This is related to better preparation and materials for teachers, also.
22. It's hard. There is not enough time. Didn't understand the questions.
23. They found the test very difficult, especially the mathematics, where they often said they did not even understand the questions.
24. Many things on the predictor are not on the test. Math and Common core too difficult. They also say that way too much writing and reading.

Also students that are coming from Colleges are not being taught a lot of the Math that is on the test. The only report on testing results I have received all year from McGraw Hill was for another agency. I tried reaching McGraw Hill several times to let them know they sent the wrong report, but I never heard back from them. I used to receive a GED test result report every three months. I have not received one report since we started administering the TASC in 2014.

25. Most students say the writing section is manageable even though it's still the second least passed test, next to math. Others have commented that some of the reading

passages are too long, although many students pass the reading section. Some students have been dumbfounded by the difficulty of the math section. Overall, students feel the test is extremely difficult, but are surprised when they get their results and find out they have passed sections they thought they failed.

26. The TASC exam is a difficult test. Some students think it is too hard and too much of a jump compared to what they are exposed to in high school. Some teachers are having difficulty with learning the math in order to teach it well.
27. Students are very angry about the new exam. There are questions in the math that are at much higher level than what many of the books prepare them for and they feel incredibly frustrated and overwhelmed by the difficult level. Many of them need the equivalency diploma in order to get a job or keep a job, and the knowledge needed to pass the exam and the amount of time they need to prepare as working adults with responsibilities to reach the mastery of so many different subjects makes it disheartening for them. They complain there is not enough time to do the work nor preparation books that are adequate.
28. Not enough time allotted for each subtest. Reading passages too long, prep material does not adequately prepare for math subtest. More exercises are needed that reflect how material is tested on the actual TASC
29. The students have stated that:
 - The test was very hard and they didn't pass (many of them did pass the test however)
 - They are experiencing a high level of anxiety during the waiting period for their results.
 - The Writing session had a lot of grammar and failed on the first attempt. Knowing the stress on grammar, prepared more and felt good on the second attempt.
 - There is a disconnect between the readiness test and the real test, especially between the science test

Survey Respondents

Agencies/Programs that do not provide HSE Preparation

BronxWorks
Mitchel Center
Queens Library, Elmhurst Adult Learning Center

Agencies/Programs that provide HSE Preparation

Borough of Manhattan Community College
Bronx Educational Opportunity Center
BronxWorks Excel Program
Bronx YMCA – NAWC
CASES
COJO at Touro
College of New Rochelle
Community Impact, Columbia University
Consortium for Worker Education
Covenant House
DC 37 Education Fund
The Doe Fund
FECS
Fifth Avenue Committee
Fortune Society
Grace Outreach
HANAC
Harlem YMCA Literacy Zone
Hetrick-Martin Institute
Lehman College ALC
Lighthouse Guild – aka Jewish Guild for the Blind
Northern Manhattan Improvement Corp.
Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow – Brooklyn site
Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow – Bronx site
Phipps Neighborhoods Justice Corps
Queens Educational Opportunity Center
Queens Public Library
Staten Island JCC
Turning Point
SUNY BEOC
Y Roads Literacy Center East New York