

The National External Diploma Program: A Solution for All WIOA Titles

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Introduction

Adult education has long been recognized as a local and regional economic driver. It fosters academic and career pathways which lead to higher wages, sustainable income, and stronger generational support for education. Given the technology available today, adults can study and advance both in traditional classroom settings, and through distance learning programs. However, not all adults are suited to the traditional environment of classroom learning and high stakes tests.

Filling multiple roles in our daily lives, adult learners parent, work, engage in family and community activities, and juggle the demands of an increasingly busy life. Education alternatives, such as distance learning, have eased the ability to engage in the education pipeline, yet high stakes testing remains the norm, a norm that is not suited for everyone. The National External Diploma Program (NEDP), established in 1975, fills a vital need for adults seeking completion of a high school diploma, while building on the expertise, experience, and skills they have acquired through life.

WIOA

WIOA has created an opportunity for service providers, across all Titles, to work together in ways never before possible. Through this collaboration and cooperation, agencies can have a greater impact on communities than ever before. The U.S. Department of Education notes, "Because the negative effects of low skills ripple through society and the economy in so many ways, raising skills can pay substantial dividends for individuals and families, business and industry, and communities at large."¹ Employability skills are no longer relegated to the adult education classroom, industry specific skills training is no longer the sole obligation of community colleges or career and technology education (CTE) programs. Job placement no longer rests solely on the shoulders of the workforce system.

The authorization of WIOA requires several actions to be taken by states and local agencies. Specifically, the legislation:

- Requires States to Strategically Align Workforce Development Programs: WIOA ensures that employment and training services provided by the core programs are coordinated and complementary so that job seekers acquire skills and credentials that meet employers' needs.
 - Every state will develop and submit a four-year strategy - in the form of a single unified strategic plan for core programs - for preparing an educated and skilled workforce and meeting the workforce needs of employers.
 - States can include other key partners in their plans such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Perkins career and technical education programs.

¹U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education. (2015, February). *Making Skills Everyone's Business: A Call to Transform Adult Learning in the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Author.

- Promotes Accountability and Transparency: WIOA ensures that Federal investments in employment and training programs are evidence-based and data-driven, and accountable to participants and tax-payers.
 - Core programs are required to report on common performance indicators that provide key employment information, such as how many workers entered and retained employment, their median wages, whether they attained a credentials, and their measurable skill gains.
 - Core programs must measure the effectiveness of services to employers for the first time.
 - DOL and DoED, with input from stakeholders, will establish a common performance accountability system for the core programs.
 - Negotiated levels of performance for the common indicators will be adjusted based on a statistical model that takes into account economic conditions and participant characteristics.
 - Performance reports for states, local areas, and eligible training providers will be publicly available.
 - Programs will be evaluated by independent third parties at least every four years.

- Fosters Regional Collaboration: WIOA promotes alignment of workforce development programs with regional economic development strategies to meet the needs of local and regional employers.
 - States will identify regions within their state.
 - Local areas in regions will have coordinated planning and service delivery strategies.

- Improves the American Job Center (AJC) System: WIOA increases the quality and accessibility of services that job seekers and employers receive at their local AJCs.
 - States will establish criteria to certify AJCs at least every three years to ensure continuous improvement, access to services (including virtual access), and integrated service delivery for job seekers and employers.
 - Key partners and services will be available at AJCs through the co-location of the Wagner-Peyser Employment Service and the addition of the TANF program as a mandatory partner.
 - The workforce system will have a common identifier so workers that need employment or training services and employers that need qualified workers can easily find their local AJC.
 - The Secretary of Labor, with input from a new advisory council, other Federal agencies, and states will develop and implement plans to improve the national workforce and labor market information system and help job seekers make informed career choices.
 - States and local areas are encouraged to improve customer service and program management by integrating intake, case management, and reporting systems.
 - AJC partner programs will dedicate funding for infrastructure and other shared costs.

- Improves Services to Employers and Promotes Work-Based Training: WIOA contributes to economic growth and business expansion by ensuring the workforce system is job-driven, matching employers with skilled individuals.
 - State and local boards will promote the use of industry and sector partnerships to address the workforce needs of multiple employers within an industry.
 - State and local boards are responsible for activities to meet the workforce needs of local and regional employers.
 - Local areas can use funds for demonstrated effective strategies that meet employers' workforce needs, including incumbent worker training, Registered Apprenticeship, transitional jobs, on-the-job training, and customized training.
 - Employers are incentivized to meet their workforce needs and offer opportunities for workers to learn with increased reimbursement rates for on-the-job and customized training.

- Provides Access to High Quality training: WIOA helps job seekers acquire industry-recognized credentials for in-demand jobs.
 - Training that leads to industry recognized post-secondary credentials is emphasized.
 - States and local areas will use career pathways to provide education and employment and training assistance to accelerate job seekers' educational and career advancement.
 - Local areas have additional procurement vehicles for training to increase customer choice and quality, including individual training accounts, pay for performance contracts, and direct contracts with higher education.

- Enhances Workforce Services for the Unemployed and Other Job Seekers: WIOA ensures that unemployed and other job seekers have access to high-quality workforce services.
 - WIA service categories of core and intensive services are collapsed into "career services" and there is no required sequence of services, enabling job seekers to access training immediately.
 - Local areas have flexibility to serve job seekers with greatest need by transferring up to 100 percent of funds between the Adult and Dislocated Worker programs.
 - Job seekers who are basic skills deficient, in addition to those who are low-income individuals, have a priority for services from the Adult program.
 - Unemployment insurance claimants can receive eligibility assessments and referrals to an array of training and education resources through the Wagner-Peyser Employment Service program.

- Improves Services to Individuals with Disabilities: WIOA increases individuals with disabilities' access to high quality workforce services and prepares them for competitive integrated employment.
 - AJCs will provide physical and programmatic accessibility to employment and training services for individuals with disabilities.
 - Youth with disabilities will receive extensive pre-employment transition services so they can successfully obtain competitive integrated employment.

- State vocational rehabilitation agencies will set aside at least 15 percent of their funding to provide transition services to youth with disabilities.
 - A committee will advise the Secretary of Labor on strategies to increase competitive integrated employment for individuals with disabilities.
 - VR state grant programs will engage employers to improve participant employment outcomes.
- **Makes Key Investments in Serving Disconnected Youth and Other Vulnerable Populations:** WIOA prepares vulnerable youth and other job seekers for successful employment through increasing the use of proven service models services.
- Local areas must increase the percentage of youth formula funds used to serve out-of-school youth to 75 percent from 30 percent under current law, although some are allocating 100%.
 - Local areas must spend at least 20 percent of youth formula funds on work experience activities such as summer jobs, pre-apprenticeship, on-the-job training, and internships so that youth can be prepared for employment.
 - YouthBuild participants can get training in growing fields in addition to construction, expanding career opportunities for these youth.
 - Key programs serving Native Americans and Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers remain AJC partners, ensuring that these program participants can access receive employment and training services from AJCs.
- **Enhances the Job Corps Program:** WIOA increases the performance outcomes and quality of Job Corps.
- Job Corps will report on the Youth program's common performance measures to increase alignment between the programs.
 - Job Corps will establish community networks with employers, labor organizations, and State and local boards to improve services to and outcomes for participants.
 - DOL will use competition to increase performance and quality so Job Corps is serving students well.
- **Streamlines and Strengthens the Strategic Roles of Workforce Development Boards:** WIOA makes state and local boards more agile and well-positioned to meet local and regional employers' workforce needs.
- State and local boards must coordinate and align workforce programs to provide coordinated, complementary, and consistent services to job seekers and employers.
 - Business continues to contribute to strategic development and other activities by maintaining a leadership role on the boards and forming the majority of workforce board members.
 - State and local boards are more strategic and flexible as board membership is streamlined.²

² <https://www.doleta.gov/WIOA/Overview.cfm>

High School Equivalency: Not for Everyone

For more than 70 years, adults seeking a high school diploma have relied on the GED Tests to demonstrate proficiency at the high school level. In 2014, the TASC and HiSET Assessments were added to the options available to adult learners in many states. However, high stakes assessments are not for everyone. Barriers often prevent adult learners from successfully navigating high stakes assessments.

The barriers adults can face when reentering the educational arena can be external, internal, educational, or a combination of them all. External barriers, sometimes called situational barriers, include the lack of transportation, work schedules, the cost of education, and child care. Each of these on their own can be a road block to achieving a high school diploma or certification, but often these barriers collude to prevent a candidate from mastering the test setting. Other external barriers are institutional in nature and tend to revolve around the lack of access to wrap-around services from the education provider. Examples of these include an understanding of financial aid, access to tutoring services, academic schedules not meeting work or family needs, and inflexible hours of operation for all related services.³

Internal barriers, also known as dispositional barriers, come from the learner. They may include low motivation, poor self-esteem, and the fear of educational failure or repeated educational failure. These barriers are often the result of previous “road bumps” in the education process. These factors often cause adult learners to be dependent on others, such as employers, spouses, friends and children, to support their educational efforts.⁴

The final barrier is educational. Adult learners may not have the metacognitive understanding of their own educational skills and abilities to best guide what support is needed in order to learn effectively. This may happen when students are not adequately prepared with foundational reading and writing skills, or are non-native English speakers.

It should be noted, however, that adult learners bring a unique and valuable set of skills and attitudes with them to educational endeavors. As Malcolm Knowles identified in his pioneering research into adult learning theory, adult learners:

- are autonomous and self-directed; they need to be free to direct themselves;
- have accumulated a foundation of life experiences and knowledge that may include work-related activities, family responsibilities and previous education;
- are relevancy-oriented; they must see a reason for learning something;
- are more problem-centered than subject-centered in learning; and
- are motivated to learn by internal factors rather than external ones.⁵

Regardless of the barrier, environments can be created to positively influence the success of the adult learner. According to research by Marina Falasca (2011), this can be achieved by:

- involving learners in mutual planning of methods and curricular directions;

³ www.reference.com/education/barriers-adult-education-2761294a34a28a3e

⁴ www.reference.com/education/barriers-adult-education-2761294a34a28a3e

⁵ <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ954482.pdf>

- involving participants in diagnosing their own learning needs;
- encouraging learners to formulate their own learning objectives;
- encouraging learners to identify resources and to devise strategies for using such resources to accomplish their objectives;
- helping learners to carry out their learning plans; and
- involving learners in evaluating their learning.⁶

Adult learners are well equipped to manage their educational success, if the correct program is offered at the appropriate time.

Integrated Education and Training

To fully understand the role NEDP can play under WIOA, it is important to understand the language of the legislation. Integrated Education and Training (IET) is critical to the laws success, and is defined as, “. . . a service approach that provides adult education and literacy activities concurrently and contextually with workforce preparation activities and workforce training for a specific occupation or occupational cluster for the purpose of educational and career advancement.” (Final WIOA regulations at 34 CFR §463.35)

Adult Education is defined as, “...programs, activities, and services that include: (a) adult education, (b) literacy, (c) workplace adult education and literacy activities, (d) family literacy activities, (e) English language acquisition activities, (f) integrated English literacy and civics education, (g) workforce preparation activities, or (h) integrated education and training.” (Final WIOA regulations at 34 CFR §463.30)

Workforce Preparation, according to WIOA is, “Activities, programs, or services designed to help an individual acquire a combination of basic academic skills, critical thinking skills, digital literacy skills, and self-management skills, including competencies in: (a) utilizing resources; (b) using information; (c) working with others; (d) understanding systems; (e) skills necessary for successful transition into and completion of postsecondary education or training, or employment; and (f) other employability skills...” (Final WIOA regulations at 34 CFR §463.34)

Lastly, according to WIOA, Workforce Training, “may include (i) occupational skill training...; (ii) on-the-job training; (iii) incumbent worker training...; (iv) programs that combine workplace training with related instruction...: (v) training programs operated by the private sector; (vi) skill upgrading and retraining; (vii) entrepreneurial training; (viii) transitional jobs...; (ix) job readiness training provided in combination with services...(i) through (viii); (x) adult education and literacy activities, including activities of English language acquisition and integrated education and training programs, provided concurrently or in combination with services described in any of clauses (i) through (vii); and (xi) customized training conducted with a commitment by an employer or group of employers to employ an individual upon successful completion of the training.” (WIOA Section 134(c) (3) (D), P.L. 113-128)

⁶ <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ954482.pdf>

NEDP

NEDP is a competency-based, high school diploma program aligned to the College and Career Readiness Standards and the IET requirements of WIOA. NEDP allows clients to use the skills gained from life and work experience to demonstrate reading, writing and math skills at the high school level. This web-based program for adults and out-of-school youth offers flexibility to earn their diploma even if they are employed full time, enrolled in job training, or have other commitments.

The NEDP contextualized learning program design encourages co-enrollment with WIOA partners in career pathway approaches. NEDP participants earn a high school diploma through documentation of educational attainment and through the College and Career Competency that prepares the client to enter the workforce, upgrade skills, advance to a better job, or move from one field of work to another. For youth or individuals with limited work experience, the College and Career Competency verifies that an NEDP graduate has the work readiness, situational judgment, problem solving and critical thinking skills to be successful in an entry level job.

Models of Implementation: Peninsula *Worklink*

Peninsula Worklink, a program of the Peninsula Council for Workforce Development and other partner agencies, offers a comprehensive range of services to address the workforce needs of both job seekers and businesses. Services provided through *Peninsula Worklink* are funded through the U.S. Department of Labor so there's never a charge, although eligibility may apply for certain services. Its vast network of resources and workforce experts makes it a truly valuable and comprehensive resource for residents and businesses.

Peninsula Worklink provides area residents and businesses with a "One-Stop" career resource center that serves as an integrated full service clearinghouse designed specifically to address the mutual needs of both job seekers and businesses. The *Worklink* mission is to address the competitive workforce needs of these two customer groups through the provision of individually tailored career and training solutions.

The NEDP program first launched in the Commonwealth of Virginia for the 1980-81 school year, and was brought to the Peninsula region in 1991. Hampton Roads NEDP is offered through the cities served by the Peninsula Region 21 Adult Education Partners, which include Newport News, Hampton, Williamsburg-James City County, York County and Poquoson. NEDP is also offered to residents of other areas such as Norfolk, Virginia Beach, Portsmouth, Suffolk, Smithfield, Gloucester, and Richmond. There is also space provided at One-Stop/AJC locations for partners who need to meet clients and for GED partners to hold workshops during the school year. The Hampton Roads NEDP program serves anywhere from 35 – 50 clients per year.

The NEDP program in the Peninsula region is managed by adult education service providers and co-funded by WIOA Titles I and II. The NEDP program is funded through multiple sources of revenue. Some of the funding comes from WIOA Title II while a portion of the necessary funding comes from tuition paid by the NEDP clients. Additional funding is received through

GAE (General Adult Education) funds, which are part of the state matching grants for the federal Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA).

The NEDP program brings together adult education service providers with *Peninsula Worklink*, and is currently working on developing a partnership with Opportunity Inc. in Norfolk. All agencies mutually refer candidates to each other, and all participating agencies are authorized to pay the local tuition fee of \$800 for approved clients.

NEDP staff work from various locations across the Peninsula Region: Newport News, Hampton or Williamsburg. NEDP staff are paid through either Hampton or Newport News Schools depending on where their client lives. Salaries are paid from tuition. The flexibility of having NEDP Advisors, Assessors, and Reviewers located across the region allows for greater access to the program.

The agencies who partner on the implementation of NEDP are committed to meeting regularly, face-to-face, engage in a regional business services provision, and co-case manage as needed. In terms of the daily operations of the NEDP program, Career Planners maintain constant contact with Adult Education sites while clients are enrolled in the NEDP to ensure successful completion. Career Planners also attend graduations and, if requested, provide supportive services approved under WIOA.

Getting the word out is key for the success of any program. This is especially true for a program as unique as NEDP. The service providers in Virginia advertise on the Hampton and Newport News schools' websites. They also deliver presentations at the Title I funded programs, human service provider locations, *Peninsula Worklink* and to other agencies interested in learning about the NEDP program.

Many of the clients enrolled in the NEDP program are referred from the GED programs in the area. Additionally, word of mouth is one of the biggest sources of prospective participants. The Newport News Shipyard is very familiar with the NEDP and regularly refers employees and union members to the program. All the adult education programs in the region refer students. Participants are accepted from throughout the region.

Outreach is also conducted through the Plugged In Virginia program (www.pluggedinva.com), which provides adult learners with resources and programs that will prepare them for careers in various industries.

Coordination is also conducted at the regional level. WIOA Career Planners brief all WIOA participants about NEDP and other program offerings, while partners share information as needed and/or as appropriate. Updates are always provided at the Workforce Development Board meetings. Additionally, the adult education service providers facilitate monthly briefing at the One-Stop, which includes a WIOA Orientation and a discussion about initial assessments with Career Planners.

Outreach and coordination is also focused on Community Based Organizations (CBOs). Staff regularly work with counterparts at both *Literacy for Life* and *Peninsula Reads* to share information and cross refer clients. Additionally, regular communication and outreach takes place with all the local social service and human service agencies, the Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS), the Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired (DBVI), the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS), Virginia Employment Commission, Rapid Response, and AARP/SESEP. [See Appendix A]

Aside from NEDP, adult education students have other options available to complete their high school diploma in the Peninsula Region. If a student is within two credits of graduating, they can enroll in diploma completion programs. The GED is also an option.

Given the workforce focus of NEDP, employer engagement is a key component to the success of the Peninsula program. One of the largest employer partners is Newport News Shipbuilding (Huntington Ingalls) where both companies and unions refer potential candidates to the NEDP program staff. Work is now underway to engage other employers such as Canon as well as additional unions operating in the area.

NEDP has been a great success in the Peninsula region. Clients routinely express that being able to work/study from home and the ability to set their own pace are key factors for remaining in the program. The fact that none of the NEDP components are timed reduces any previous test anxiety and allows them to apply real-life, work situations rather than studying for and taking an academic test. These factors reduce stress for clients, as the NEDP program eases anxiety for older clients who have been out of the classroom for what is often many years. The online nature of NEDP also allows clients to work individually on their goals, but receive one-on-one interaction with their assessor on a routine basis. Lastly, all clients are given the opportunity to participate in a graduation ceremony while wearing a cap and gown, an experience that is a milestone success for these adult learners.

Conclusion

As the country looks ahead to the 21st century, the need for workplace skills and competencies is vital. Recognizing a person's ability to do a job, based on the skills and abilities they have mastered over a lifetime of work and experience, is critical. NEDP is the only competency-based high school diploma program in the United States. Although developed almost 40 years ago, the core of the program almost envisioned the implementation of WIOA through a model that promotes Integrated Education and Training. The updating of NEDP to align with the Career and College Readiness Standards has created a program that meets the needs of not only adult education students, but also employers and workforce professionals who recognize the importance of adult education as an economic driver in our local communities.

According to Wanda Boulden, Senior Career Planner at *Peninsula Worklink*, "The NEDP program is an excellent and effective alternative to the GED. Customers who complete this program are more motivated to enter other training and education programs."