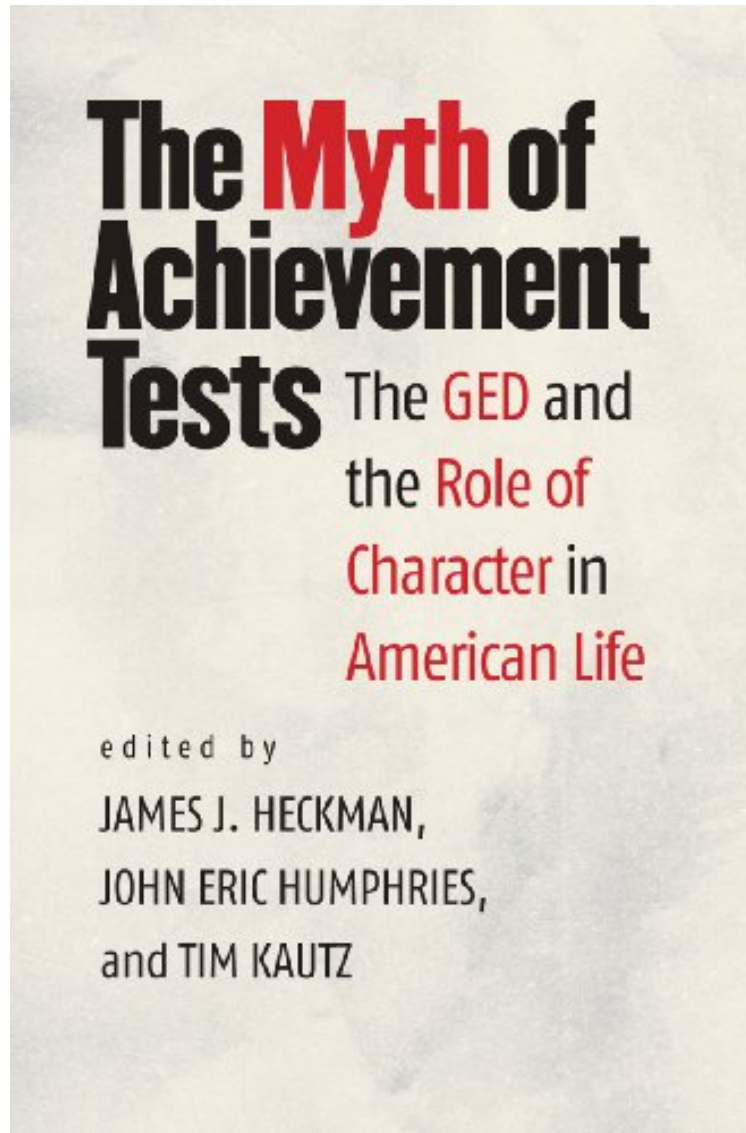


## The Myth of Achievement Tests: The GED and the Role of Character in American Life

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**From University of Chicago Press : The Myth of Achievement Tests: The GED and the Role of Character in American Life** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Myth of Achievement Tests: The GED and the Role of Character in American Life:

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clear4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. When a Test Needed in Post-WWII Lingers On To Sidetrack Our Future Youth By John Richard Schrock *The Myth of Achievement Tests: The GED and the Role of Character in American Life* edited by James J. Heckman, John Eric Humphries, and Tim Kautz. 452 pages hardcover, copy; 2014, University of Chicago Press. Although this is an edited compilation, the editors pack this book with ten chapters, the last nine that flow like a one-author book. It makes a profoundly strong case against the GED. This book will not be favored by the Education School establishment because it is built on solid history without regard for the every-three-year fads that churn paradigm-less educationism. The main editor is a Nobel Prize-winning economist and the other two editors are likewise economists. Each chapter is followed by an extensive list of references. Some folks think of the GED as a "graduate equivalency test" while the actual name is General Education Development testing program. Today, the American Council on Education (ACE) is an advocate of the test as is Pearson Education, Inc. The general public image of the GED is that it gives high school dropouts a "second chance" to complete their high school education. This book assembles the ample negative data to show that the GED has many negative consequences and is not anywhere near the equivalent of the high school experience. However, with America stuck in the third iteration of "No Child Left Behind" (the Every Student Succeeds Act) that continues the test prep pressures on public schools under state laws, the clear distinction between genuine high school and the teach-to-the-GED may be narrowed due to the erosion of public schoolwork by the very tactics used to prepare students for the GED. Chapter 1 begins to explain how this book "evaluates the predictive power of achievement tests for life outcomes by examining one widely used achievement test...the GED." At the time this book was released, much criticism of the GED had led to its revision to more closely match up with the "common core" tests that were spreading in usage across the United States under the U.S.D.E. This chapter lays out an overview of the problems they will analyze and document in detail in later chapters:

- As a group, GED recipients are not equivalent to high school graduates.
- Genuine "high school graduates outperform GED recipients in earnings, employment, wages, labor market participation, self-reported health, and college completion."
- GED recipients are more "likely to use alcohol, commit crime, or go on welfare."
- "GED recipients earn the same wages before and after they certify."
- "As a group, GED recipients lack character skills compared to high school graduates." One exception to the above group is girls who dropped out due to pregnancy; when they completed GEDs, their performance was more similar to regular high school completers.

However, these authors discuss and separate their studies from those in "The Bell Curve" insofar as that Herrnstein and Murray book concluded heredity was the main factor while this book pursues measurable features of character and "the malleability of IQ." Ultimately, this book asserts that "the GED distorts social statistics and masks inequality" and they back this with evidence. This chapter also probes the origins of achievement testing: Mann, Spearman, Jensen, Taylor, Tyler, et al. One graph demonstrates the dramatic increase in standardized tests per student. Other graphs list other tests used to "validate" the GED, the changes made to the GED since WWII, the hours spent in preparation for the GED in 1980 and 1989, the distribution of students by cognitive ability for GEDs vs dropouts versus regular students, labor market differences, and weekly wage ratios. Chapter 2 addresses the "Institutional history of the GED" and traces the rise of achievement testing theory and practice. However, theory gave way to urgency when World War II reduced the draft age of students and led to heavy debate between military, university and education parties over how to provide "wartime diplomas" for students pulled out of high school or returning after service; "nearly 10 million World War II veterans had not complete high school, although half had some high school education... Since neither the military nor the federal government could grant high school credentials, ACE staff worked to convince the various state departments of education of the value of using their GED test as the basis for awarding high school degrees." Despite serious problems norming the GED, the financial support from the Rockefeller General Education Board and the Carnegie Corporation encouraged the ACE to expand GED use for soldiers coming back who had not graduated high school. States adopted the GED to "give veterans the benefit of the doubt" and the experience base and maturity of those returning veterans could be considered to be the character and work ethic factors that made that generation's use of the GED different from the non-veteran cohort of GED recipients today. "In spite of the availability of the GED test, over three million World War II veterans used the GI Bill...to return to high school after their discharge from the service." Chapter 3 explains how the "GED testing program grew from 37,000 takers in 1950 to over one million in 2001. As numbers went up, the percent of veterans taking the GED went down. This chapter also provides an analysis of recent high school dropouts versus older non-trads and also incarcerated prisoners. Chapter 4 describes who the new GED recipients are. In an era of an all-volunteer army that only takes high school graduates, although GED recipients can apply, the GED is not serving the same role as it did post-WWII. Chapter 5 analyzes "the economic and social benefits of GED certification" and the data are mostly negative. Many graphs illustrate the difference in skills and backgrounds between GED recipients and other students, including the National Longitudinal Survey of youth 1979. One graph details the number of 2004 cohort GEDs who enrolled in postsecondary education with only 2 percent attaining an AA degree, 1.3 percent gaining a bachelors degree and 0.1 percent a masters or above. Here is the data showing essentially no difference in wages and other indicators between GEDs and dropouts. If

anyone keeps detailed data on recruits, it is the military. Chapter 6 looks at "the military performance of GED holders" and the cost to taxpayers is high. GED holders (along with those who attend virtual high schools, data not in this book) have higher rates of attrition and the armed forces attempted to establish quotas until the Congress prevented them. Table 6.1 lays out the 36-month attrition rates for each service broken down into the various education credentials. Chapter 7 then leads to the real problem of how "the GED testing program induces students to drop out." Various state threshold scores and option programs are described. Three studies are used to support this assertion. "Increasing the passing requirements of the GED test reduces dropout rates." A nationally-mandated increase in passing scores also decreased dropout rate. Introducing the GED in Oregon decreased regular high school graduation rates, as it later did in California. Bottomline, the GED induces students to drop out of school. Chapter 8 traces the recent "high-stakes testing and the rise of the GED" by noting that nearly 25 million GEDs were issued between 1980 and 2009, or about "one-sixth of all high school-leaving credentials awarded during that time period." By this time, an intelligent reader is fairly jaundiced about the value of the GED and this huge number of questionable high school graduates will be shocking. The authors rightly acknowledge the pressures on teachers and school administrators to raise graduation rates by any means. This is a short, technical and disturbing chapter. Chapter 9 now moves to the more positive effort of "fostering and measuring skills: interventions that improve character and cognition. They pursue the "big five personality factors: conscientiousness, openness to experience, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism/emotional stability. Unlike the prior chapters, this chapter ranges far wider and is much more speculative. It asks more questions than it answers, including what skills are "needed for success in the labor market?" Many programs and populations are summarized. The authors insist that "character is a skill—not a trait" and that character can be shaped, especially in earlier childhood. Three pages describe the authors and a 10-page index concludes the book.

Achievement tests play an important role in modern societies. They are used to evaluate schools, to assign students to tracks within schools, and to identify weaknesses in student knowledge. The GED is an achievement test used to grant the status of high school graduate to anyone who passes it. GED recipients currently account for 12 percent of all high school credentials issued each year in the United States. But do achievement tests predict success in life? *The Myth of Achievement Tests* shows that achievement tests like the GED fail to measure important life skills. James J. Heckman, John Eric Humphries, Tim Kautz, and a group of scholars offer an in-depth exploration of how the GED came to be used throughout the United States and why our reliance on it is dangerous. Drawing on decades of research, the authors show that, while GED recipients score as well on achievement tests as high school graduates who do not enroll in college, high school graduates vastly outperform GED recipients in terms of their earnings, employment opportunities, educational attainment, and health. The authors show that the differences in success between GED recipients and high school graduates are driven by character skills. Achievement tests like the GED do not adequately capture character skills like conscientiousness, perseverance, sociability, and curiosity. These skills are important in predicting a variety of life outcomes. They can be measured, and they can be taught. Using the GED as a case study, the authors explore what achievement tests miss and show the dangers of an educational system based on them. They call for a return to an emphasis on character in our schools, our systems of accountability, and our national dialogue. Contributors: Eric Grodsky, University of Wisconsin—Madison; Andrew Halpern-Manners, Indiana University Bloomington; Paul A. LaFontaine, Federal Communications Commission; Janice H. Laurence, Temple University; Lois M. Quinn, University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee; Pedro L. Rodríguez, Institute of Advanced Studies in Administration; John Robert Warren, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

"With *The Myth of Achievement Tests*, James J. Heckman, John Eric Humphries, and Tim Kautz have offered a wealth of insightful analysis and brought together a number of topics often treated separately to inform a comprehensive discussion of the growth, character, and impact of the GED that is truly monumental. This is a first-rate book."