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Prepared By: Marit Rogne

Purpose: Provide an overview of the National External Diploma Program (NEDP) and the current state of adult basic education and equivalency exams in New Mexico.

Witness: Mitch Rosin, Program Consultant, CASAS

Expected Outcome: A deeper understanding of the NEDP option for adults and out-of-school youth

National External Diploma Program (NEDP)

National research suggest adults without a high school credential are more likely to live in poverty, become incarcerated at some point in their lives, rely upon public assistance, and cost taxpayers an average of \$200 thousand over their lifetimes. According to the Public Education Department (PED), in New Mexico, high school dropouts face a 13 percent unemployment rate and earn an average annual income of \$11,426. Over 50 percent of adults incarcerated in New Mexico lack a high school credential. According to the Higher Education Department (HED), of the 1.1 million adults over 25 years old in New Mexico, over 240 thousand have not finished high school and another 162 thousand cannot speak English or do not speak English well. More than 400 thousand adults cannot participate fully in family, work, and community opportunities and would benefit from adult basic education, but our New Mexico adult basic education programs serve only about 23 thousand per year, or almost 6 percent of the eligible population.

Background of the National External Diploma Program. The NEDP was created in 1975 in response to research indicating adult education classes were not compatible with adult responsibilities, class content was unrelated to real life, and the test format was too limiting. In 1979, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) recognized the NEDP as an exemplary program and the NEDP expanded as an alternative option for adults to earn a high school diploma. Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS), a nonprofit organization that provides basic skills assessments and curriculum tools, acquired the rights to the NEDP in 2006.

The NEDP offers students the opportunity to earn a high school diploma as opposed to a high school equivalency credential. The federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and the federal Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education recognizes the NEDP as an alternative pathway to a high school diploma. WIOA, signed into law July 2014, provides for collaboration between the U.S. Department of Labor, the USDE, states, local workforce development boards, and social service providers to improve the lives of out-of-school youth.

Program Overview. According to CASAS, the NEDP is a flexible, performance-based option for adults and out-of-school youth to earn a high school diploma plus an occupational or specialized skill. The NEDP is a web-based, self-directed program that provides students the flexibility to complete the program at home on their own time.

NEDP in Other States

According to the CASAS website, there are currently 83 NEDP agencies in eight participating states:

- California
- Connecticut
- District of Columbia
- Indiana
- Maryland
- New York
- Rhode Island
- Virginia

About 3,000 students take the NEDP annually.

This means students can earn their high school diploma while still maintaining a full-time job, taking care of family, or managing other commitments. On average, students take four to 12 months to complete the NEDP. The program is self-paced and untimed.

Competency-Based Education

Competency-based learning offers students the opportunity to progress as they demonstrate mastery of academic content, regardless of time, place, or pace of learning. Often, the term competency-based learning is used interchangeably with personalized learning. Competency-based and personalized learning strategies include online and blended learning, dual credit and early college high schools, project-based and community learning, and credit recovery, among others. Critics argue personalized learning has a very weak evidence base, despite its recent growth in popularity.

NEDP Competencies. The NEDP assesses three foundational content areas and seven functional life skill content areas, aligned to the common core college and career readiness standards. The common core college and career readiness standards outline what students should know, and New Mexico is among 45 states and the District of Columbia that adopted these standards. Students must demonstrate their high school level abilities in the academic content areas of communication and media literacy, applied math/numeracy, and information and communication technology. Students must also demonstrate life skills competency in civic literacy and community participation, consumer awareness and financial literacy, cultural literacy, geography and history, health literacy, science, and the 21st century workplace. Students demonstrate competency on the NEDP by applying their skills to simulated academic, workplace, and life contexts.

Performance Tasks. The NEDP is an applied performance assessment in which students demonstrate their abilities in a series of real-life situations. Students complete multiple performance tasks in all 10 content and life skills categories to demonstrate mastery of each area. Each performance task is evaluated by a certified NEDP assessor and then verified by a portfolio reviewer. The assessor and portfolio reviewer use standardized evaluation criteria to determine if a student has demonstrated mastery or not. According to CASAS, each NEDP assessor and portfolio reviewer is required to complete an 18-hour training that covers all components of the NEDP, including the NEDP competencies, the diagnostic and standardized performance assessment phases of the program, and the evaluation criteria.

College and Career Competency. In addition to demonstrating mastery in all 10 content areas on the NEDP Generalized Assessment, students must complete the college and career competency. According to CASAS, the college and career competency verifies an NEDP graduate has the work readiness, situational judgement, problem-solving and critical-thinking skills to be successful in an entry-level job. To meet the college and career competency, students must demonstrate a job skill, specialized skill, or advanced academic skill.

High School Equivalency Credential Tests in New Mexico. PED has approved two high school equivalency exams: the General Education Development (GED) test and the High School Equivalency (HiSET). These tests are offered through HED's Adult Education Division, which serves adults who function below the high school completion level. Successful completion of both exams leads to a high school equivalency credential issued by PED, who has plenary authority over public education according to statute. CASAS is interested in implementing NEDP in New Mexico so that adults would have the option to earn a regular high school diploma as opposed to a high school equivalency credential.

