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Testimony to the Committee on Education of the Council of the City of New York
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Issue: Restructuring of the DOE's Alternative High School Programs

Recommendation: Greater investment in these programs to make them the "frontline" for returning disconnected youth

There are approximately 170,000 disconnected youth in NYC—young people between 16 and 24 who are not in school and not in work. Of these approximately half do not have a diploma or GED.

There is no day more important in the life of a disconnected youth than the day that they wake up and say, "Today is the day that I am going to get back on track." That day is important for our City in many ways: its economy, social fabric, and moral fiber. It means the possibility of a City less divided into the haves and have-nots; it means a more competitive workforce and greater tax revenues; and it means that we can offer young people a second chance.

Young people know very little about workforce development and the intricate systems of public funding of these services. They do, however, know about the GED. When a disconnected youth wakes up one day and decides to reconnect, the first thing that most of them think of is the GED.

Thousands of young people seek out a GED as a way to reconnect, the DOE's Alternative High Schools and Programs (District 79) is the biggest GED game in town. Most of these returning youth are too old to have enough time to get a diploma, are too scared to re-enter high school at an older age, or have simply had such bad experiences in the traditional system that they are unwilling to return.

The District 79/youth GED system, as such, is a wasted opportunity if it is viewed as just a GED system – rather, it should see itself as the frontline of the youth reconnection system. We need to make sure that we take advantage of the fact that these young people, on their own volition, decided to seek a second chance. These are, for the most part, the same young people that got a very bad first chance in life, and who have not experienced success in a classroom environment. They have not been told that they are great learners, with wonderful potential.

It is too early to judge the changes that District 79 has recently made. We applaud their creative thinking and fresh ideas: reorganization and the addition of a "Learning to Work" component, as

well as the new Access GED sites. We would like to see all GED programs feature internships and other career and college preparation. We also need to make sure that young people know how to access these programs, though; one of my recent calls to 311 that I made with a young person seeking a GED program ended up as a dead end.

If it is truly to take advantage of this opportunity, the City should invest in its Alternative High Schools with the range of supports that will ensure those returning youth made the right decision. That means strong case management, delivered within a youth development framework; rigorous instruction that is designed for young people who have not been successful previously; and ancillary programs that can prepare young people for the world of work and college.

There is a clear tension about making GED programs attractive, because we do not want young people who should get diplomas to settle for anything else. However, we can have high expectations for all young people and still make the GED a robust alternative to diploma. This involves:

- **Making sure the right young people are in the GED system.** This will require a strong system of assessment and case management as well as a porousness between HS diploma schools and GED schools. Young people with low levels of confidence should be allowed to start in GED and be encouraged to move into diploma-granting programs as they begin to succeed. Similarly, young people that do not make it in the diploma system for whatever reason, should be guided to a strong GED program, and
- **Raising the age cap.** We should allow young people up to age 24 into these programs. Right now, once you turn 22, you graduate into a much leaner adult system. Yet 22-24 year olds are still dealing with issues of transition, and are not ready for “adult” environments. This age cap could be increased if the DOE used some of its adult education monies in District 79.

There is considerable research about the impact of getting a GED. By itself, it usually has a short-term positive impact on job attainment, with little long-term impact. But if coupled with college placement or other workforce development supports, obtaining a GED can have a great return. As such, we need to overinvest in these programs, to make them worthwhile. We can follow the example of CUNY Preparatory High School in the Bronx, a GED-awarding school whose focus is on college and college-readiness, not just the exam. We can have GED programs that prepare young people for entry into specific careers, such as construction, IT, or other growth industries.

I will end with a quote with a young man in a GED program at New Heights Neighborhood Center in Washington Heights. This program is run by a nonprofit using D79 teachers:

- “Getting a high school diploma means that you were doing what you were supposed to do when you were young. Getting a GED means that you made a mistake, but you fixed it.”

We need to make sure that young people get a second chance, especially when so many of them did not get enough of a first chance. A truly robust District 79 would be a great step toward achieving this goal.