

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION OPTION IN WATERTOWN: THE HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY DIPLOMA PROGRAM

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When people learn that I work with “at-risk” students, I am usually offered a standard set of condolences, preceded by a sigh or gasp. Quickly, I explain that most of my students would be offended by the label “at-risk” as it somehow implies lack of ability, intelligence, and/or have been in trouble with the law. In reality, students often choose alternative programs because the traditional classroom environment could not meet their individual needs.

The High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED) program offers students another path toward graduation. Just one of many alternative programs in Wisconsin, the HSED is highly respected in the state. Regarded as a “step above” the GED, earning an HSED opens more doors to employment and post-secondary opportunities than the GED option. Additionally, those who have earned an HSED in lieu of a GED expect to make an average of \$100,000 more in his/her lifetime.

There are eight required academic components in the program. First, students must pass the five GED core subject tests: math, writing, reading, science and social studies. All tests are cumulative, requiring students to know and master a wide range of material. Besides the battery of tests, students must also pass a health, civics and employability course.



In addition to the required components, students engage in a variety of supplemental activities. Some of these include - exploring and discussing current events, issues related to racism and discrimination, goal setting, and life skills training. This past semester, members of the Watertown High School guidance team facilitated “Prime for Life”, a three week alcohol and drug risk reduction program. Also, HSED students will be going on their first field trip in January to the Milwaukee Public Museum. Finally, several HSED students have been tutoring and mentoring students at Riverside Middle School, volunteering one hour per day.

Once students have completed all five GED tests, passing with a 450 average or above, and the other required components of the program, students participate in a graduation ceremony at the end of the school year. 92% of eligible students graduated from the program in 2008.

In closing, I would like to include some thoughts from HSED students about how the program has impacted their lives.

- *“This program is very important to me. Without this program, I wouldn’t be graduating. Not only was I behind in credits, but the traditional high school with all the kids and little help, made it very difficult for me.”*
- *“This program touches my heart in everyway because when I’m here all my worries go away and I learn and understand what is being taught.”*
- *“This program means a lot to me and my family. I’m getting a good education without the pressure of regular high school. They know I’m learning and getting help.”*
- *“The program means that I have a second chance of getting a diploma. It has impacted me by making me realize that I am smart.”*
- *“This [program] has taught me that I can learn faster than I did before. It taught me someone cared and is making sure I succeed.”*
- *“This program has impacted me in multiple ways. It has shown me that people care and that just because I couldn’t learn in the high school style doesn’t mean that I am stupid person.”*

For more information about the HSED Program in Watertown, please contact Stephanie Bentheimer at the Alternative Learning Center, 920-206-3769 or at bentheimers@watertown.k12.wi.us.