

# Measuring the Impact of High School Completion for Adult Learners

Career Online High School



**Student**



**Graduate**



**Employee**

# Measuring the Impact of High School Completion for Adult Learners

## Changing Lives & the Public Library

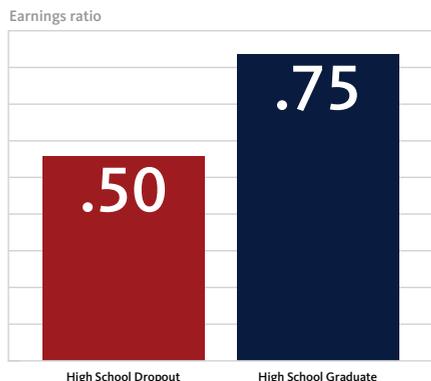
The dropout crisis in the United States has reached epidemic proportions in recent years. Every 26 seconds, another student gives up on school. Today, nearly 40 million American adults are without a high school diploma, and limited options are available for those seeking to return to high school.

As one of our nation's most trusted educational institutions—and as an entity already focused on supporting adult literacy, GED preparation, and workforce development—the public library is an effective venue for an end-to-end high school completion program for adult learners.

John Szabo, city librarian for the Los Angeles Public Library, sees this new area of library service as part of an evolution in public libraries—going from repositories and organizers of information to active learning institutions that have a measurable impact and that are strategically aligned with other education-focused organizations in their communities. “The ability of the library to offer an accredited high school diploma to those in need is a powerful deliverable. People find it easy to see the link between a library’s mission and doing work in this area,”<sup>1</sup> Szabo says.

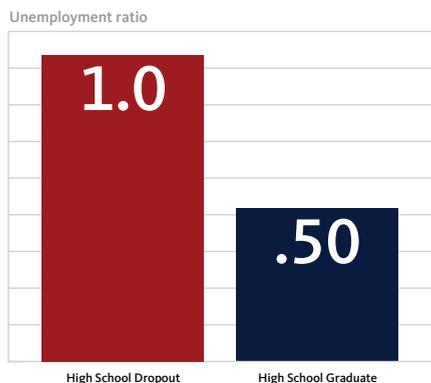
## The High Cost of Dropping Out

The cost of dropping out of high school continues to rise for Americans and the nation. Adults who dropped out are more likely to be unemployed, have poor health, live in poverty, be on public assistance, and be single parents. In contrast, high school graduates earn 50 to 100 percent more in lifetime income, providing additional revenues to communities and government.<sup>2</sup>



**High school graduates earn at least 50 percent more than high school dropouts in lifetime income.**

Communities bear the impact of high school dropouts most sharply, as individuals and families deal with the stress associated with dropping out. High school dropouts face a stark employment picture, with unemployment rates double that of high school graduates. This strain affects their health and social relations, leading to lower life expectancies and higher family dissolution rates, as well as incarceration rates many times higher than those of graduates.<sup>3</sup>



**Unemployment rates for high school dropouts are double that of high school graduates.**

Increased crime and incarceration rates in communities with higher dropout rates have an exponential impact. Investment and other resources become more scarce as the cost of dealing with the problems increase. Conversely, high school graduates contribute to their communities' economy by spending more, including higher-value home and auto purchases.<sup>4</sup>

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A high school dropout costs the nation \$300,000 over their lifetime.

## Cost to Taxpayers

A 2009 study estimated that the total lifetime cost per dropout to taxpayers is almost \$300,000—most of that borne at the local and state level.<sup>5</sup> The lower employment and higher incarceration rates for high school dropouts negate the tax contributions of this population when compared to high school and GED completers. As a college education becomes more necessary for employability in our society, the gap between high school dropouts and four-year college graduates expands to a lifetime difference of \$800,000 in fiscal contributions.<sup>5</sup> Increasing the high school graduation rate from the 2012 figure of 73% to a more acceptable 90% would increase federal tax revenue by an estimated \$1.3 billion and state and local tax revenue by \$661 million per year.

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## The Uncertain Benefits of GED Certificates

Due to the gravity and scale of this problem, government and communities have launched innumerable programs to address dropout rates, from pre-school to adulthood. For adult dropouts, one of the only alternatives has been to seek a General Educational Development (GED) certificate. However, the assumed benefits of such programs have come into question. Studies as far back as 1991 examined this question and found that “exam-certified high school equivalents are statistically indistinguishable from high school dropouts.”<sup>6</sup> More recently, a 2006 study from the National Bureau of Economic Research found that “there is no direct economic return to GED certification.”<sup>7</sup> When comparing high school graduates to GED recipients, we see that “eventual high school graduates have much better post-secondary education outcomes than do the similar [students] who drop out and obtain a GED.”<sup>8</sup> In the end, there appears to be no substitute for schooling.

These findings not only contest the value of the GED, they also indicate the true cost of high school dropouts has been systematically underestimated, as GED recipients are almost always grouped with high school graduates. This incorrectly reduces the breadth of the true gap between high school dropouts and graduates.

In January 2014, to address the disparity in the value of the GED versus a high school education, the seven-hour GED exam was overhauled to bring the certificate more in line with a high school diploma. Employers are pleased that the higher standards will result in a better-educated pool of candidates from which to hire for positions that are becoming increasingly technical in nature.

However, enhancing the academic requirements has led to a change in how GED students prepare to pass the exam. The more rigorous assessment means test takers need a longer prep time and more technical skills. In addition, the exam can no longer be taken using pen and paper but is administered by computer, requiring basic computer literacy. The cost of taking the new GED exam has increased, creating an additional pain point for an already at-risk population.

The massive GED revamp has led many educational organizations to rethink how they can support the new program. Some states have dropped the program completely, turning to other testing agencies. As one volunteer math teacher said, “They both moved the goal posts back and moved the crossbar higher.”<sup>9</sup>

## Reversing the Impact of High School Dropout Rates

For adults without a high school diploma, few options exist to help improve their future opportunities. To help combat this educational crisis, Career Online High School was established in 2011 by Smart Horizons Career Online Education, as a vocation-based high school completion program allowing adults to earn an accredited high school diploma and a career certificate. Initially offered to students through host institutions such as career colleges, correctional facilities, and businesses, Career Online High School is now available at participating public libraries through Gale, part of Cengage Learning.

Career Online High School provides a school-like learning experience (with lessons, academic support, and assessment) that allows busy adult learners to participate according to their own schedules. Unlike other high school completion programs, the school’s unique methodology addresses three key factors proven to contribute to the dropout rate—lack of applicability, fear of failure, and absence of support.

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“Career Online High School is another way for libraries to have a positive, substantive impact on the communities they serve and play an important role in addressing a widely recognized public need.”

**John Szabo**

City Librarian for the Los Angeles Public Library, the first library system in the country to offer Career Online High School

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“Most people would not associate the term ‘trauma’ with the high school dropout experience, yet through my educational background I found that it is the reality for many of the 40 million adults in the U.S. without a high school diploma. Some of my initial clinical social work experience focused on how people respond to trauma; I believe that many humans respond to educational failure—whatever the circumstances—in much the same way they respond to a traumatic event.”

**Dr. Howard Liebman**  
CEO and Superintendent of Smart  
Horizons Career Online Education

## Real-world application

Career Online High School’s approach to learning addresses the educational trauma that affected many of these students during their previous high school experiences. The negativity associated with the educational system can cause them to have a “flight” response to subsequent encounters. Career Online High School engages students first in their career-based courses (in high-demand fields ranging from childcare and education to security, retail, and office management), establishing applicability and allowing them to build confidence and success before introducing the core academic subjects.

## Nurturing success

Students build on successes with the Career Online High School curriculum model. Adult learners reach a level of mastery of the material with a score of 70% or better before progressing to the next unit. Students can revise their work based on specific feedback until they meet the targeted outcomes. Remediation is offered to help students overcome any difficult subject areas. This online instructional approach provides adult learners with a positive educational experience.

## Engagement and support

In addition to the relevancy of the student’s program of study, personal engagement keeps students interested. Career Online High School pairs each pupil with an academic coach, who welcomes them to the program and guides them through the process. Once registered (typically through a scholarship granted by the library), students log into their online classroom. There, they connect to:

- 24/7 access to course content and instruction
- Instant feedback on lessons and exams
- Remediation as needed — assigned tutors
- Tools to keep track of progress, such as Gradebook and Pace Guide (which helps students move through the program by completing one course credit every two weeks)
- Online learning resources, including an eLibrary, a calendar, and academic support services

Students are fully supported by a team of instructors, coaches, and other staff. For example, an academic coach monitors student “pacing” activity and reaches out by phone, email, and social networking tools, while board-certified instructors provide academic support. Staff members help students plan for their next career steps. Additionally, technical support is available by phone or email.

This accredited program prepares students for the workforce and post-secondary vocational training by delivering high-quality, supportive, and career-based online education.

## Economic impact: The ripple effect of earning a high school diploma

Ana Lopez, 27, currently earns just above the federal minimum wage as a cashier at a local supermarket, making \$16,410 per year at \$7.89 per hour. She aspires to earn a Child Development Associate certification following her successful graduation from Career Online High School. As an infant/toddler teacher at a local child care center, Ana could see an immediate 50% increase of her annual salary to \$24,627 per year, at \$11.84 an hour, with potential to earn more than \$50,000 if she rises to the Director level.

The benefits to Ana and her family are tangible: in addition to higher earnings and employment, she'll realize benefits to her overall quality of life. Furthermore, Ana will contribute to the economic growth of her community with an additional lifetime contribution of \$349,222 in the form of spending, most of it at the local level and subject to local taxes. Likewise, with her higher income, Ana will contribute an additional \$61,627 in taxes over her lifetime to the state and the federal governments.

If Ana were to become a head of household with two dependents, she would require at least \$50,000 less in government assistance over her lifetime once she has earned her diploma and certificate.

*This hypothetical example was created using documented salary figures and applying the figures summarized in this study. See references 10–12 for salary estimates.*

### Real-life benefits of earning a high school diploma



## Graduate Success Story

“The program allowed me to get the education I needed to pursue the job that I always wanted and set me up for success. I was finally able to answer ‘yes’ on a job application when they asked if I graduated high school. As a result of my diploma, I was able to earn more money, get good benefits, and buy a house.”

### Deanna Boersma '12

Career Major: Homeland Security  
Occupation: Certified Correctional Officer

## Learn More Today

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## About Gale, part of Cengage Learning

Gale is a leading provider of educational content, tools, and services to libraries, schools, and businesses. Gale helps libraries fulfill their mission to improve lives and move their communities forward. Gale shares the vision of the library as the heart of its community and helps libraries support entrepreneurship, encourage self-directed learning, aid in research and instruction, and more. From instructor-led courses and rich digital resources, to circulating large print and original fiction, and a range of partner services, Gale delivers what libraries need to meet the demands of their communities.

## About Career Online High School, part of Smart Horizons Career Online Education

Career Online High School, part of Smart Horizons Career Online Education (SHCOE), is an 18-credit, career-based high school completion program designed to prepare students for entrance into the workforce. SHCOE, founded in 2009 and located in Pensacola, Florida, is a private, AdvancED/SACS accredited online school district. AdvancED/SACS district accreditation signifies that SHCOE and all of its schools are accredited and recognized across the nation as a quality school system. Career certificates offered by COHS include Child Care and Education (CDA), Office Management, Certified Transportation Services, Homeland Security, General Career Preparation/Professional Skills, Retail Customer Service Skills, and Food and Customer Service Skills.

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