



Adult Basic Education - Workforce Diplomas

Executive Summary

Approximately 9.3% of Missourians over the age of twenty-five do not have a high school diploma or equivalency. Higher educational attainment is often associated with more job opportunities, higher income and reduced poverty. States also benefit from increased tax revenue and reduced spending on crime, healthcare and welfare programs. In 2017, [HB 93](#) authorized a [state-approved nonprofit](#) to open and operate four adult high schools across the state to help Missourians over the age of 21 finish their high school diplomas and obtain industry-recognized credentials. [House Bill 2325](#) and [SB 957](#) propose related versions of a performance-funded Workforce Diploma Program for Missourians over the age of 21 who have not yet obtained a high school diploma. Approved adult education providers would only be paid when students achieve academic (e.g., high school diploma) and employability (e.g., industry-recognized credentials) milestones. Data reporting and program evaluation in states with workforce diploma programs will be central to identifying successes and addressing barriers to meeting student and workforce needs.

Highlights

- **Institutionalized** (e.g., correctional institution, nursing home) and **nonwhite Missourians are most likely to lack a high school diploma or equivalency.**
- There is a **demand for “middle skills” jobs in Missouri**, which require more than a high school diploma but less than a bachelor's degree.
- The Workforce Diploma Programs proposed in [HB 2325](#) and [SB 957](#) are substantially **similar to programs in at least five states (CO, IN, KS, MI, OH)**. While not identical to the workforce diploma, several other states and schools use other types of **integrated adult education-workforce programs** (e.g., GED Bridge to College).
- **Performance-based funding ensures that programs deliver specified outcomes**, but may also cause **some providers to limit the enrollment of “high-risk” (e.g., limited literacy) students to keep graduation rates high.**

Limitations

- Most workforce diploma programs in the United States have been implemented within the last five years and their reporting requirements vary, making it difficult to measure how they directly impact the number of credentials awarded and workforce needs filled.
- Without information about those who enroll in and complete adult education programs (and if/how this changes), it is difficult to predict who will participate and benefit most from a workforce diploma program.

MOST Policy Initiative, Inc. is a nonprofit organization that provides nonpartisan information to Missouri's decisionmakers. All legislative Science Notes are written only upon request by members of the General Assembly. This Science Note was published on 2/4/21 by Dr. Brittany Whitley and updated on 1/20/22 by Dr. Alan Moss, Education & Workforce Development Policy Fellow – alan@mostpolicyinitiative.org.

Research Background

Educational Attainment

Individual Outcomes

As of 2019, approximately 9.3% of Missourians over the age of twenty-five do not have a high school diploma (or equivalency).¹ These Missourians have a lower median salary (**Figure 1**) and a higher poverty rate compared to those with a high school diploma or some level of postsecondary education.¹ Some adults who previously dropped out of high school choose to work toward their high school diploma or equivalency (e.g., GED, HiSET) in order to expand their job opportunities and earning potential.² The Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce defines a “good job” as one that offers a minimum salary of \$35,000 for workers between the ages of 25 and 44 and at least \$45,000 for workers between the ages of 45 and 64. By their measure, 20% of these good jobs require a high school diploma or less, 24% require middle skills (associate’s degree, certificates) and 56% require a bachelor’s degree or higher.³

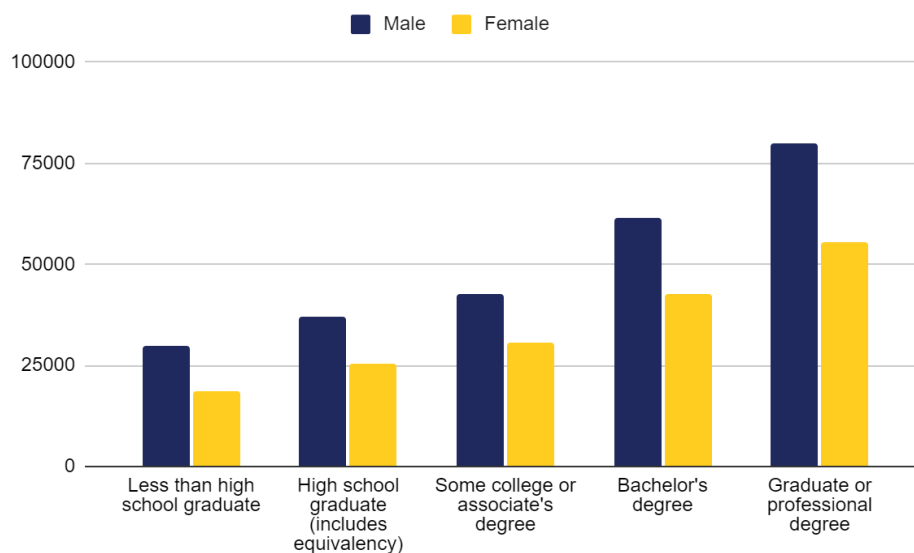


Figure 1. Median income of Missourians by education attainment and gender, as of 2019.¹

State Outcomes

Preventing high school dropouts and successfully recovering adult dropouts is expected to reduce state spending by averting costs related to healthcare, crime, corrections, and welfare.⁴ Linking high school diplomas to industry-recognized credentials also facilitates adult education that is targeted toward filling the workforce needs of the state. Thirty five percent of Missouri jobs are classified as “low skill”, meaning that they require a high school diploma or less and include jobs available to high school students, dropouts and Missourians with only a high school diploma. 41% of jobs in Missouri require some training after high school, but less than a bachelor’s degree.⁵ These “middle skills” jobs are projected to represent approximately

one-third of the annual job openings and produce almost 132,000 jobs between 2016-2026.⁵ Those who obtain industry-recognized credentials are likely to be quickly hired, especially when school-community partnerships are established. (see also Science Note on [Specialized vs. Generalized Post-Secondary Education](#))

Adult Dropout Recovery Services in Missouri

Existing Services

All Missouri high schools (public and nonpublic) are required to report the name, address and phone number of any student sixteen years old or older to the state who leaves high school for any reason other than going to another school, college or university, or to enroll in the armed services ([Mo. Rev. Stat. § 167.275](#)). The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) is then required to reach out to those students and let them know where the nearest location that offers adult basic education services (e.g., GED prep & testing) is located. One challenge with this system is that contact information may be incorrect, especially if schools wait to report, making it difficult for DESE to reach every student. DESE also provides MOlearns, a free, online high school equivalency preparation class. As a result of bipartisan legislation related to adult high schools ([HB 93](#), 2017), [MERS Goodwill](#) was offered a contract in 2018 to start four adult high schools (“Excel Centers”) in St. Louis, Poplar Bluff, Columbia, and Springfield. In addition to providing free high school diplomas, these centers offer flexible courses, child care and a mentoring program.

Workforce Diploma Programs in Other States

Several states, including Michigan, Kansas, Ohio, & Indiana, currently operate very similar programs. Because this type of workforce diploma program has only recently been implemented statewide in these states, there is limited data about program outcomes, especially how it impacts earnings over time. Some regions have had longer running Bridges to College & Career programs where adult basic education training programs have successfully partnered with community colleges and employers to meet the needs of the area’s employment market. In [Rochester, MN](#), their bridges program primarily focuses on training healthcare professionals, many of whom are placed at the nearby Mayo Clinic. As of 2017, 2/3 of program participants were people of color and 86% of people who participated in Rochester’s program obtained a training-related job with benefits.⁶

Program Participation and Access

Students

Additional information is needed about who usually participates in adult dropout recovery programs to understand which population(s) the workforce diploma program will impact most. The demographics of high school dropouts highlight what populations might benefit most from combined education and job training programs. Dropout rates among Black (7.8%) and Hispanic (10.9%) 16-24 year olds in Missouri are higher than the dropout rate for white (5.3%)

16-24 year olds.⁷ Almost one third (32.4%) of the institutionalized population between 16-24 years old does not have a diploma and is not enrolled in adult education.⁷ The Division of Offender Rehabilitative Services within the Missouri Department of Corrections requires that any offenders without a high school diploma or equivalent participate in adult basic education classes.

Providers

Performance funding is often intended to promote positive student outcomes and ensure provider accountability. One concern about performance-funded programs is the unintended consequence of selective enrollment practices.^{8,9} Opponents argue that even small skill gains, especially for learners with reduced literacy skills, can be valuable but not rewarded through this type of program.

References

1. U.S. Census Bureau. (2019). 2019 American Community Survey 1-year Estimates Subject Tables . Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=educational%20attainment%20missouri&d=ACS%201-Year%20Estimates%20Subject%20Tables&tid=ACST1Y2019.S1501>
2. Van Horn, B.L. & Kassab, C. (2011). An Analysis of Rural and Urban Pennsylvania Adults Taking, Completing and Passing the GED. *Center for Rural Pennsylvania*. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED517576.pdf>
3. Carnevale, A.P., Strohl, J., Ridley, N., & Gulish, A. (2018). Three educational pathways to good jobs. *Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce*. Retrieved from <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/3pathways/>
4. Levin, H.M., Belfield, C., Muennig, P.A., & Rouse, C. (2007). The Costs and Benefits of an Excellent Education for All of America's Children. *Columbia University*. <https://doi.org/10.7916/D8CF9QG9>
5. Missouri Department of Higher Education & Workforce Development. (2020). Missouri Middle-Skill Job Report 2016-2026. Retrieved from <https://meric.mo.gov/media/pdf/middle-skills>
6. Hawkins, B. (2019). Adult Education Comes of Age: New approach blends basic academics and job training. *Education Next*, 19(2), 38-46. Retrieved from <https://www.educationnext.org/adult-education-comes-of-age-new-approach-blends-basic-academics-job-training/>
7. McFarland, J., Cui, J., Holmes, J., Wang, X. (2020). Trends in High School Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States: 2019 Compendium Report. *National Center for Education Statistics*. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020117.pdf>
8. Ortagus, J. C., Kelchen, R., Rosinger, K., & Voorhees, N. (2020). Performance-Based Funding in American Higher Education: A Systematic Synthesis of the Intended and Unintended Consequences. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 42(4), 520-550. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373720953128>
9. Pickard, A. (2016). WIOA: Implications for Low-Scoring Adult Learners. *Journal of Research and Practice for Adult Literacy , Secondary and Basic Education*, 5(2). Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1125478>