

**SURVEY OF HSED/GED GRADUATES  
OF OMEGA SCHOOL  
MADISON, WISCONSIN**

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## Executive Summary

This study examines a sample of persons who had not finished high school but earned the GED after studying at Omega School. Its aim is to answer the question: WHAT DIFFERENCE IF ANY HAS THE GED MADE IN THE LIVES OF ITS RECIPIENTS?

The answer in brief is that passing the GED tests has had positive impacts on the lives of its recipients, not only in employment and economic benefits but also in improving the quality of their lives. Moreover, its effects are lasting and increase over time, and the effects differ somewhat by gender.

Questionnaires were mailed to 583 persons in the Omega School files who had been awarded the GED in the years 1994 to 1998 and in 2001. Completed questionnaires were received from 112 GED recipients for a response rate of 19 percent. The 112 respondents were not a random or representative sample of Omega School graduates, but the survey's findings have provided meaningful and useful answers.

When awarded the GED, nearly half the respondents were no older than 19 years of age, but some were 35 or older. Over half were women. Two-thirds were unmarried. A variety of ethnic groups was represented, but nearly three-fourths were white.

Most respondents had completed ten or eleven grades of school before dropping out. As to why they dropped out, the majority gave reasons such as "poor grades," "not doing well in school," or "wasn't interested." However, on some reasons, men and women differed. Men were more likely to have quit in order to take a job or because of problems with alcohol or drugs, while women were more likely to do so due to problems with other students, because of pregnancy or marriage, or because of family illness.

As to why they decided to prepare for and take the GED tests, three primary reasons were cited. Almost three-fourths said it was for personal improvement. Some said it was for educational admission, and a few said it was job-related.

The highest level of education attained by two-thirds of the respondents was the GED, although some in this group indicated that they were working towards a college degree. Nearly ten percent already had an associate's degree, and several had a bachelor's or master's degree.

As to economic and/or job benefits, some respondents indicated that since earning the GED they found a better-paying job (44%), received a raise (21%), started saving or investing more (25%), moved to a different home or neighborhood (30%), or became a homeowner (15%). In general, higher proportions of men than women reported gaining these benefits.

Respondents also indicated that gaining the GED had helped "some" or "very much" to improve their quality of life in such respects as feeling better about themselves

(96%), increasing their income (67%), feeling economically secure (67%), being a better parent or partner (62%), and contributing more to the community (82%). Here, on all aspects, higher proportions of women felt that the GED had enhanced their quality of life.

To find out whether it takes time for the effects of the GED to appear, the 49 respondents who were awarded the certificate five to nine years ago were compared with the 63 recipients who have held it for two years. The results were striking.

On job-related and economic aspects—getting a raise, finding a better job, saving or investing more, moving to a different home or neighborhood, or becoming a homeowner—the benefits reported by those who have held the certificate five or more years were much greater, indeed, at least twice as great.

On quality-of-life benefits, the same general pattern held. That is, many of those holding the GED for two years indicated that they felt better about themselves, had increased their incomes, felt economically secure, were better parents or partners, and contributed more to the community. On all counts, however, higher proportions of those who received the GED five or more years ago reported these life-enhancing gains.

Respondents also expressed opinions about the GED test preparation classes at Omega School. As to how many times they had enrolled in preparation classes, of every ten respondents, two did not enroll at all but studied on their own and passed, six enrolled once before taking and passing the tests, and two enrolled two or more times.

In rating the helpfulness of the preparation classes, respondents saw them as most helpful in two respects—passing the GED tests and meeting their own goals. Three-fourths said they were helpful in learning to write better and in learning about science. Two-thirds said they were helpful in learning to read better and learning about law and government.

Although respondents gave positive marks to all aspects of the preparation classes, teachers received the highest ratings, followed by the times that classes were held. These ratings are understandable. The teachers work as one-on-one tutors, and tutor and student often become friends. As to times, Omega School maintains flexible time schedules to accommodate students' domestic or work responsibilities.

Respondents were asked how many people they had encouraged to take GED preparation classes. Sixty percent had urged one to five others, 23 percent had encouraged more than six, and only 10 percent had encouraged none.

Given the opportunity to comment on what the GED has meant to them, almost 90 percent of the respondents provided written remarks, most of them positive. Comments fell into two groups. One group, about a third of the respondents, saw the award of the GED as a goal they had finally attained. For the majority, however, earning the GED was seen as a rung on a ladder, a stepping-stone to higher education or improved job prospects.