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## Hey, Why Don't We Start an External High School Diploma Program?

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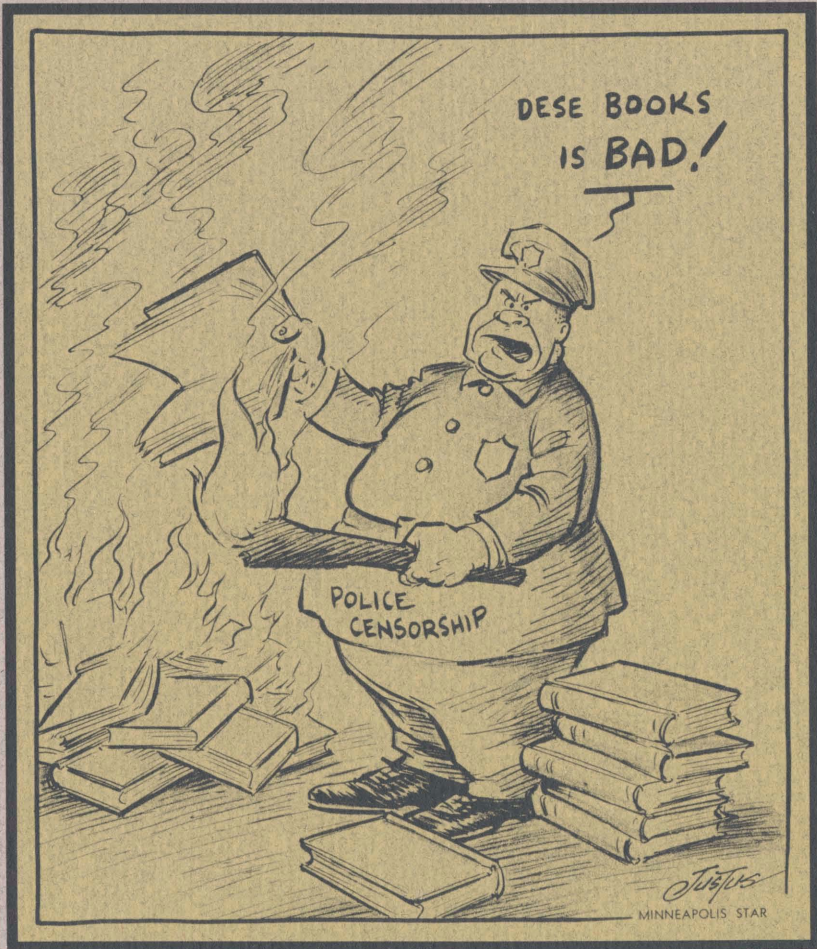
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- An Interview with Barney Rosset,  
Former Chairman and President of Grove Press  
By Mary Beth Hinton, Editor 3  
*Syracuse University Library Associates Courier*
- “Say! Dis is Grate Stuff”:  
The Yellow Kid and the Birth of the American Comics  
By Richard D. Olson, Research Professor of Psychology, 19  
University of New Orleans
- National Service: A Forty-Three-Year Crusade  
By Donald J. Eberly, Executive Director, 35  
National Service Secretariat, Washington, D.C.
- Hey, Why Don’t We Start an  
External High School Diploma Program?  
By Patricia King, External Diploma Program Assessor, 55  
Onondaga-Cortland-Madison BOCES; and  
Mary Beth Hinton, Editor  
*Syracuse University Library Associates Courier*
- Portrait of a City: Syracuse, the Old Home Town  
By John A. Williams, Novelist and Journalist 65  
Introduced by Robert Phillips, Professor of English  
and Director of the Creative Writing Program,  
University of Houston
- News of the Syracuse University Library and the  
Library Associates 89

*This issue is dedicated with gratitude and affection  
to Gwen G. Robinson*

# Hey, Why Don't We Start an External High School Diploma Program?

BY PATRICIA KING AND MARY BETH HINTON

STEPHEN K. BAILEY (1916–1982),<sup>1</sup> a distinguished educator, once remarked that the four most powerful words in the English language are “Hey, why don't we . . .”<sup>2</sup> In 1972 he and his colleagues Francis U. Macy and Donn F. Vicars, who shared his passionate commitment to educational change, designed the New York State External High School Diploma Program,<sup>3</sup> the first program to award high school diplomas based on demonstrated competence, regardless of how that competence was acquired.

Bailey had been an early advocate of “competency-based education”, which was, he said,

a rather fat phrase for a fairly muscular idea: that persons should be awarded academic credits and degrees, or occupational licenses and certificates, on the basis of proven performance rather than on the basis of formal classes attended, prescribed courses completed, or arbitrary amounts of time served in a particular learning role.<sup>4</sup>

1. Stephen K. Bailey was dean of the Syracuse University Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs from 1961 to 1969, at which point he became chairman of the Syracuse University Research Corporation's Policy Institute, a local “think tank”. Bailey also served on the New York State Board of Regents from 1967 to 1973. That year he moved to Washington, D.C., to become vice-president of the American Council on Education.

2. Stephen K. Bailey, “Continuous Education Throughout Life” (address delivered to the Twenty-eighth Annual Midwinter Forum of the Auerbach Service Bureau for Connecticut Organizations, Hartford, Connecticut, 26 January 1973).

3. Some records of the program's early development were given to Syracuse University by Jean Kordalewski, who was part of the original EDP team and who recently retired as director of the Regional Learning Service of Central New York.

4. Stephen K. Bailey, “Career Education and Competency-Based Credential-

In 1971, as a member of the New York State Board of Regents, Bailey helped create the Regents External Degree Program, through which adults can earn a college degree by demonstrating that they have fulfilled specific curriculum requirements.

He and his two colleagues at the Syracuse University Research Corporation (SURC)<sup>5</sup> saw a need for a similar program at the high school level. To earn a traditional high school diploma, one must spend twelve years in classrooms. But for a variety of reasons—economic, familial, psychological, cultural—not everyone is well served by this system. Nor is the GED (General Equivalency Diploma) Test,<sup>6</sup> the most widely-used alternative to attending high school, always suitable. In 1972 Bailey et al. wrote:

More than 40 percent of Americans over 22 do not have a high school diploma. A large percentage of students—some 900,000 annually—continue to drop out of high school before graduation. The social and economic price to society is well documented. Statistics on unemployment, welfare, and crime do not adequately reflect, however, the sense of personal failure, the brooding hostility toward others, the psychic withdrawals and lash-outs that so frequently accompany dropping out of an established system that seems to do so well for so many.<sup>7</sup>

By 1991 the External Diploma Program, or EDP, had enabled more than 10,000 adults<sup>8</sup> who might otherwise have fallen through

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ism” (Syracuse University Research Corporation, 1973), 14. (A contribution to the Career Education essays sponsored by the U.S. Commissioner of Education, Sidney P. Marland, Jr.)

5. In 1977 the name was changed to Syracuse Research Corporation (SRC).

6. The GED Test is a five-subject, two-day, high school equivalency test. It was developed after World War II for veterans and service personnel.

7. Stephen K. Bailey, Francis U. Macy, and Donn F. Vickers, *Alternative Paths to the High School Diploma* (Prepared by the Policy Institute, Syracuse University Research Corporation, for the Ford Foundation, 1973), 7-8.

8. Statistic from Florence Harvey, “The National External Diploma Program: An Adult Competency High School Diploma”, *CAEL* [Council for Adult and Experiential Learning] *News*, vol. 14, no. 2. (Spring 1991).

the cracks to obtain their high school diploma—that ticket to self-respect and advancement in our credential-conscious society.

#### HOW THE EDP BEGAN

In 1972 SURC received a grant from the Ford Foundation to design an alternative route to a high school diploma. Bailey and Vicars convened a thirty-member group of educators, businessmen, and other community leaders to sketch the broad outlines of a high school curriculum for adults. As Dorothea Nelson, a member of that group, recalls, “Bailey wrote three questions on the board: ‘Who’s out there? What do they need to know? How can we help them?’” She said, “We worried about the future of all those adults without diplomas. How would they support themselves and their children?”<sup>9</sup>

The SURC group talked to high-school dropouts—rural and urban disadvantaged, expectant and young mothers, Viet Nam veterans, non-conformists, non-English speakers, the physically handicapped, and those in drug rehabilitation. Nelson said, “We met with them to find out why they had dropped out and why they might drop back in; we met them on their turf—bars, hotel lobbies, living rooms”. The group discovered that these adults were not using existing programs because they felt that the timing was often inconvenient, the course content was irrelevant, and the final testing was intimidating.

The SURC group also identified general areas in which they believed adults needed to be competent: communication, computation, self-awareness, social awareness, consumer awareness, scientific awareness, and occupational preparedness.<sup>10</sup>

They envisioned a program based on the needs of adults. Unlike children, most adults can work independently. But because they

9. Dorothea Nelson, conversation with Mary Beth Hinton, Syracuse, N.Y., 6 May 1993.

10. The choice of these areas has been validated by subsequent studies and by students’ assessments of their relevance. See Ruth S. Nickse, *Assessing Life-Skills Competence: The New York State External High School Diploma Program* (Pitman Learning, Inc., Belmont, California, 1980), 31–32. The competency *technological awareness* was later added by the American Council on Education.

tend to have many demands on their time, they need to have choices regarding when and where they will do their work. Furthermore, adults, being used to solving problems of everyday life, often respond best to learning tasks that simulate real-life situations.

In early 1973, Bailey, Macy, and Vicars, drawing on the group's ideas and findings, produced a monograph<sup>11</sup> containing a detailed description of the proposed program. Another grant, this one from the State Education Department, enabled SURC to develop and implement that program.

The New York State External Diploma Program was to be administered by the recently-established Regional Learning Service (RLS) of Central New York<sup>12</sup>—also founded by Bailey, Macy, and Vicars. It would be another year, however, before the first twenty-five diploma candidates were enrolled.

#### STARTING FROM SCRATCH

Ruth Nickse was project director and principal investigator during the EDP's early, experimental years, and she had a staff of about eight people. Although Bailey moved in 1973 to Washington, D.C., Macy and Vicars, as RLS administrators, continued to be involved in the EDP.

Among the first moves Nickse made was to organize a task force of educational consultants to identify specific competencies. She recalled:

It was extremely important to get the right mix of people. We advertised in the paper. We were looking for people who were strong in some content area and who had experience with adult learning. Maybe twenty-five or thirty responded. We took fourteen. We wanted a wide mix because if you bring together two or three English teachers, for instance, they start to show off for each other. They

11. Bailey, et al., *Alternative Paths*.

12. The Regional Learning Service is an educational and career counseling/brokering service. It was designed to help learners assess their strengths and weaknesses, define their career and educational goals, and identify learning opportunities appropriate to their goals. The RLS and the EDP were intended to be complementary.

keep raising the standard as they became more impressed with the importance of their own field. We knew this would take away from answering the basic question, which was always, What does an adult need to know and to be able to do?<sup>13</sup>

After meeting as a group, each task force member produced a list of competencies in his or her own field. When the group met again, each person had to read the list and defend it. Nickse described the process:

There was a huge amount of ridicule and argument. I can remember one person—I guess an English teacher—saying, “Everybody ought to know rules of language and be able to punctuate and love Shakespeare”. Then a phys. ed. teacher got up and said, “That’s not important. Take it off your list. I hate Shakespeare and I can do all those other things. That’s not a functional skill. It’s too difficult.” So when his turn came he said, “Everybody ought to know the categories of food and how to report an emergency and how to find their way to a doctor’s office or a clinic and how to set a bone”. The English teacher said, “That’s absolutely ridiculous. If you have a broken bone, you ought to know how to get to a hospital. Take that off your list.”

After six weeks the group had identified 100 competencies. To refine the list further, Nickse invited people from all over the city of Syracuse to react to it. They voted on the competencies, which were again revised until being unanimously approved. The final list contained sixty-four “life skill competencies”.<sup>14</sup> Following are examples of the competencies listed under the general areas that had been identified by Bailey et al.:

COMMUNICATION [adequate for adult functioning]

Read

Listen

13. Ruth Nickse, telephone conversation with Patricia King, 1 September 1993.

14. There are now sixty-five competencies.



View  
Write  
Speak

#### COMPUTATION

Compute whole numbers  
Compute decimals  
Compute percentages  
Compute and approximate area

#### SELF-AWARENESS

Apply decision-making process  
Identify own values and goals  
Identify the uses of music to manipulate emotions  
Exercise responsibilities for own health and that of family

#### SOCIAL AWARENESS

Collect information on community resources  
Estimate time and distance  
State contributions of different cultures to American life  
Exercise rights and responsibilities of citizenship

#### CONSUMER AWARENESS

Obtain and list sources of consumer information  
Distinguish between fact and opinion in everyday consumer practices  
Identify and compare sources of consumer credit in making a purchase decision

#### SCIENTIFIC AWARENESS

Read scale on standard measuring device  
Solve simple equations  
Convert measurements  
Classify information

#### OCCUPATIONAL PREPAREDNESS

Identify own vocational interests and aptitudes  
Compare various occupations  
Identify characteristics of a good worker.<sup>15</sup>

15. Judith Alamprese, Norma S. Feldman, and Linda Lehman, *New York State External High School Diploma Program Manual of Generalized Assessment Materials*

The next step was to create a system for assessing whether diploma candidates had mastered the sixty-four competencies and an individual skill. “Most important to me”, said Nickse, “was developing a fair, viable, and valid assessment system that would give adults an opportunity to demonstrate what they knew”. She hired Margaret Charters, a human development professor from Syracuse University, to devise a system for assessing occupational skills. Charters, too, held focus group meetings, in her case to identify specific tasks that could be used to demonstrate each competency. She said:

It was very challenging, very intellectually stimulating; it was time consuming, but it was fun. I remember bringing in people who were teachers in child care and cooking to help us think through some of the activities that would demonstrate these skills. We really started from scratch.<sup>16</sup>

#### THE EDP IN OPERATION

The result of these labors was a two-phase program. During the diagnostic phase, an advisor evaluated applicants’ basic skills in reading, writing, and math. In addition to basic skills, each person had to possess an individual or special skill—perhaps welding or dairy farming. Using a self-assessment checklist, applicants evaluated their own mastery of the sixty-four competencies. Although the program itself provided no instruction, if deficiencies in required skills were discovered, the advisor suggested learning options, such as attending classes, using the library, or seeking help from a friend or a tutor. Unsuccessful applicants could re-apply after correcting their deficiencies.

Successful applicants entered an assessment phase, which lasted about two to five months. During this phase they demonstrated

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(Syracuse, N.Y.: December 1975; revised June 1978). Produced by the Regional Learning Service, a division of the Syracuse Research Corporation, under a grant from the Division of Continuing Education, New York State Education Department, under the Adult Education Act.

16. Margaret Charters, telephone conversation with Patricia King, 1 September 1993.

mastery of the sixty-four competencies, taking time as needed to brush up (on their own) on certain skills. They also had to demonstrate, or supply proof, that they possessed an individual skill. After fulfilling these requirements, candidates received a regular high school diploma through the local school board.

Significantly, competencies were not demonstrated in a sequence starting with number one and ending with sixty-four. Rather, they were integrated within *tasks*. For example, to carry out the task *locate places on a map*, a candidate had to be able to measure the distance and estimate the travel time between one point and another. This task calls for three competencies in three difference areas: *read* (a map), under COMMUNICATION; *estimate time and distance*, under SOCIAL AWARENESS; and *read scale on standard measuring device*, under SCIENTIFIC AWARENESS. Assessors assigned groups of tasks to candidates, who demonstrated them during weekly “spot-check interviews”.

Norma Feldman, who was an assessor during the EDP’s early years, recalled what those interviews were like:

We avoided using language and procedures associated with school. For instance, we never used the word “test”, and we tried to get away from pencils and papers and “You’ve got fifty minutes to write down what you know”. There are other ways to get adults involved. They don’t have to line up in little chairs in front of a teacher. We asked them to deal with realistic situations, such as having to compute the area of a room—it was always a complicated L-shaped room. If they couldn’t do it, we told them why—they may have done the multiplication correctly but added the two squares incorrectly. Then we’d send them home and they’d have to find a way to figure it out. The issue was not, Can you memorize facts? It was, Can you take the concept of area and apply it to this situation? Adults have to be able to do that.<sup>17</sup>

17. Norma Feldman and Marion Kalenak, conversation with Mary Beth Hinton, Syracuse, N.Y., 11 August 1993.

Candidates could prove that they possessed an individual skill in one of three ways: (1) by asking an employer to certify the fact, (2) by presenting proof of having completed some course of training, or (3) by demonstrating their skill in front of an expert. For those who chose the third option, a separate assessment instrument had to be developed. Sharon View, who joined the EDP in 1976, developed an assessment for a security guard. First she interviewed experienced security guards to find out what a person in that position had to know. “There were differences”, she explained, “in what the various experts thought should be included”.<sup>18</sup> After weighing these, View cast the list of skills in the appropriate language: “It had to be very concrete”. For example, a security guard must be able to identify the four classes of fire. The completed assessment instrument would be administered by an expert in the field.

Dorothea Nelson, an EDP staff assistant, remembers that an expert had to be found to assess a candidate’s skill in raising parakeets. The program enrolled bricklayers, bookkeepers, carpenters, models, offset printers, meat cutters, small business managers, softball umpires, and ballroom dancers, among many others. However, the most popular skills were, and have continued to be, home management and home maintenance.

The assessment process culminated in an annual graduation ceremony, which was by all accounts a joyful event because, as Sharon View explained,

It was the fulfillment of a dream. Our graduates, like so many adults out there, were worthy of a high school diploma, but for various reasons they would not have been able to get one through traditional means.

Although materials and procedures have been refined, the basic design of the EDP remains unchanged. After the model had been tested for a year, the program was used in other locations. By 1976 the State Education Department had funded five additional sites in the Syracuse area.<sup>19</sup> In 1980, when the Regional Learning Service

18. Sharon View, telephone conversation with Mary Beth Hinton, 8 September 1993.

19. In New York State, candidates may participate in the program only if their

lost funding for it, the local EDP was adopted by the Onondaga County Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES).

#### A PROMISING FUTURE FOR THE EDP

Of the more than fifty-one million adults today who do not have a high school diploma, about 2400 a year enroll in the EDP.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, almost half a million take the GED (General Equivalency Diploma) Test, a credentialing option that tends to attract younger adults.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, because of its sound design and its suitability for some people—especially adults over the age of thirty-five—the EDP continues to grow. The journal *Adult & Continuing Education Today* predicted that the number of graduates in the program would rise to 40,000 annually:

If the External Diploma Program has been small, it has nonetheless been effective. A study shows that 25 percent of the graduates went on to take educational courses. Of those who are employed, 53 percent received a raise in salary and 22 percent acquired a change in job title after obtaining their diplomas. A whopping 94 percent reported an increase in confidence to undertake new challenges, and 83 percent said they felt more positive about their skills and abilities.<sup>22</sup>

The American Council on Education (ACE), which also administers the GED Test, obtained the rights for the New York State External Diploma Program in 1990. By that time ten other states had adopted the New York State model,<sup>23</sup> and the ACE plans to make the program available in all fifty states by the year 2000.

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school district accredits the EDP. The program is accredited by all but two of some twenty school districts serving the Central New York area.

20. David Stewart, "External High School Diploma Program Affiliates with ACE", in *Adult & Continuing Education Today* (27 August 1990), 4.

21. Statistic from American Council on Education handouts on the EDP.

22. Stewart, "External High School Diploma Program Affiliates with ACE", 4.

23. The participating EDP states are California, Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, Montana, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. Some of these states offer the program at only one location, unlike New York State which has twenty different sites.