

ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAM GETTING READY FOR BIG CHANGES New Standards for High School Equivalency Exam



Gay Egan, Adult Education Program Coordinator, and a student

January 1, 2014, the U. S. Department of Education's Common Core standards went into effect, affecting students all across America. The Common Core standards have generated much public discussion – pro and con. One change that has gone almost unnoticed is the replacement of the General Educational Development Test (GED), the standard test that adults take as a high school equivalency exam, with a much more difficult high school equivalency exam.

The change will have a major impact on the low-income adults who participate in our Adult Education program.

The new high school equivalency exams – there are three versions, published by three testing companies – are aligned with the Common Core standards. Since the Common Core standards are more rigorous, so will be the high school equivalency exams.

The high school equivalency exam is also a seven-hour test that should be taken over multiple days and it costs two times as much as the GED.

“Studying for the new test will require a commitment of time, and an access to resources, that most high school drop-outs just don't have,” noted Gay Egan, Program Coordinator of Adult Education at Mercer Street Friends.

“Many of our students work full- or part-time jobs with unpredictable schedules. There are many single parents who have to find childcare in order to be able to come

to our tutoring sessions. There are other challenges as well. Our adult learners have faced significant challenges in their lives. There are many reasons why people leave school – personal issues, family issues, and fear of violence in the school are just a few. Some of our immigrant students have never attended school at all,” says Gay.

Debby Cohen, a retired teacher from the West Windsor-Plainsboro School District volunteers as a tutor in the Adult Education program at Mercer Street Friends. She observes, “The students are all just as nice as can be but many are unprepared to retain and to reinforce the learning that they do here.” She explains that they have simply never been taught *how* to learn. “Until I started tutoring here at Mercer Street Friends, I wouldn't have believed that students at this age could be so unfamiliar with basic math and science concepts,” remarks Debby.

Gay is also concerned that many of the adult students in the program have not attended school in so many years that the curriculum will be far beyond what they were expected to learn when they attended school. The new test includes advanced mathematics that many students who are now in their 40s and 50s were not required to take in school.

The new test may also require a greater knowledge of the sciences and history in order to respond to questions that utilize higher levels of abstract thinking. That poses a significant challenge for adults who have not received a comprehensive elementary and middle school education.

Some educators are worried that the new academic standards, which require higher and higher levels of abstraction in traditional academic disciplines, might not be relevant to the types of jobs that the people taking the high school equivalency exam are seeking. It has been suggested that the new exam will do a better job of getting students ready for college, which is the path to the best jobs.

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Dear Friends,

Recently, I was asked what "evidence based practices" are.

Having taught research and program evaluation and having been trained in a scientist-practitioner model, a very technical explanation ran through my mind. However, I simply stated that "Evidence based practices are interventions that we know work because they have been proven effective before we adopted them."

We do not have time, money, or opportunity to waste on methods that are not already proven.

Accountability to our clients, supporters, funders, and our own high standards, demands that we find ways to bring the best practices to those who need them most and are least likely to receive them otherwise...and that we conduct evaluation.

I hope that in the time that you sit with this issue of "Circle of Friends", you will be brought closer to our "doing what works". Our goal is not simply to inform our supporters about our programs, but also to educate about the larger and more complex dynamics which impact families living in poverty. These issues are difficult to detangle, but people have been thinking about them, researching them, and writing about them for a long time.

We have the advantages of great training, technology, loyal supporters, and a fair dose of good old fashion "stick-to-it-ness" working for us.

Apparently, those advantages work for our children and families as well.

Onward,
Shannon M. Mason

MERCER STREET FRIENDS YOUTH PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS CHOSEN TO ORGANIZE STATE'S YOUTH CONFERENCE

Six Trenton students have been chosen to assist in planning the 2014 Youth Conference. The conference is hosted by the New Jersey Department of Children and Families and the Children's System of Care (CSOC) in collaboration with Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care (UBHC).

They were chosen from a pool of applicants from all regions of the state to serve on the Youth Steering Committee for the conference. The students selected are U'Quan Hodeges Horton (age 16), Shelly Suah (18), Taylor Lee (17), Melody Johnson (16), Melinda Johnson (14), and Patience Kanafei (17). All attend Trenton Central High School West Campus.

These young men and women participate in Mercer Street Friend's life and vocational skills training programs: The Youth Enrichment Program (YEP) and the Student Employment Preparation and Enrichment Strategies (STEPS). Both programs are designed to provide participants educational and experiential opportunities that will help them enter the workforce. Each of the nominated students demonstrated a good work ethic and leadership qualities in the program.

"I am so elated about the opportunity to feature our youth in a statewide initiative," remarks Anniesha Walker, Director of Clinical Initiatives and leader of youth programming at Mercer Street Friends.

"This will not only give them a chance to work with other teens throughout the state, but it will also provide them with a significant experience in political and business practices. Local media tend to highlight negative outcomes about Trenton youth; I look forward to sharing the positive stories that will come from this initiative."

In the upcoming weeks, the Youth Steering Committee will meet to discuss the overall plans for the conference, scheduled for August 9, 2014. The conference will run from 9:30 am to 3:30 pm at Rutgers University Busch Campus Student Center and the members of the Youth Steering Committee will be actively involved in making sure that the conference is successful. In addition to the prestige that being appointed to the Youth Steering Committee offers, the students will also receive a stipend for their work on the conference. ■

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For many of Mercer Street Friend's adult students, however, college is not the goal. Their goal is much more practical and immediate: To get a high school equivalency certificate because it's required by more and more low-wage employers all the time.

The challenges that the new high school equivalency exam poses will be daunting, making our Adult Education program all the more important and vital to our adult students who are so motivated to close educational gaps and move out of poverty. ■

WEST WARD ALLIANCE SPONSORS TRENTON MAYOR'S FORUM

Optimism was the Winner!

By 5:40 pm, there was no where to park, not an available seat in the auditorium and the chants could be heard all the way down the block. The planning committee had made preparations for about 150 attendees, but faster than the team of youth volunteers could set out extra chairs, Trenton residents were streaming in.

It was at once nerve-wracking and exhilarating. By the opening greeting

the residents were standing along the walls, spilling into the hallways, and even creating more seating on the floor. The campaigning outside has ceased and each of the 450 attendees were so attentive, that you could hear the proverbial pin drop.

So began the candidate's forum held on March 18th at the Lighthouse Outreach Ministries and co-sponsored by the Mercer Street Friends West Ward Alliance.

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Pamela Sims-Jones was at the helm. As the project coordinator for the West Ward Alliance, she was in charge of carrying off the West Ward Alliance's first Mayoral forum. Steering committee members, community partners, clergy, and Mercer Street Friends staff comprised her support team.

The West Ward Community Needs Assessment data provided the direction for the forum. The League of Women Voters facilitated the discussion.

Yet it felt like so much more than a gathering of residents to hear about the political platforms of mayoral candidates.

In previous West Ward sponsored gatherings, residents had expressed their fears. There were fears about safety and violence, lack of educational and employment opportunities, and opportunities for youth. But listening to the questions asked by residents, the responses from the candidates and informal conversations after the forum, it was clear that optimism was in the air.

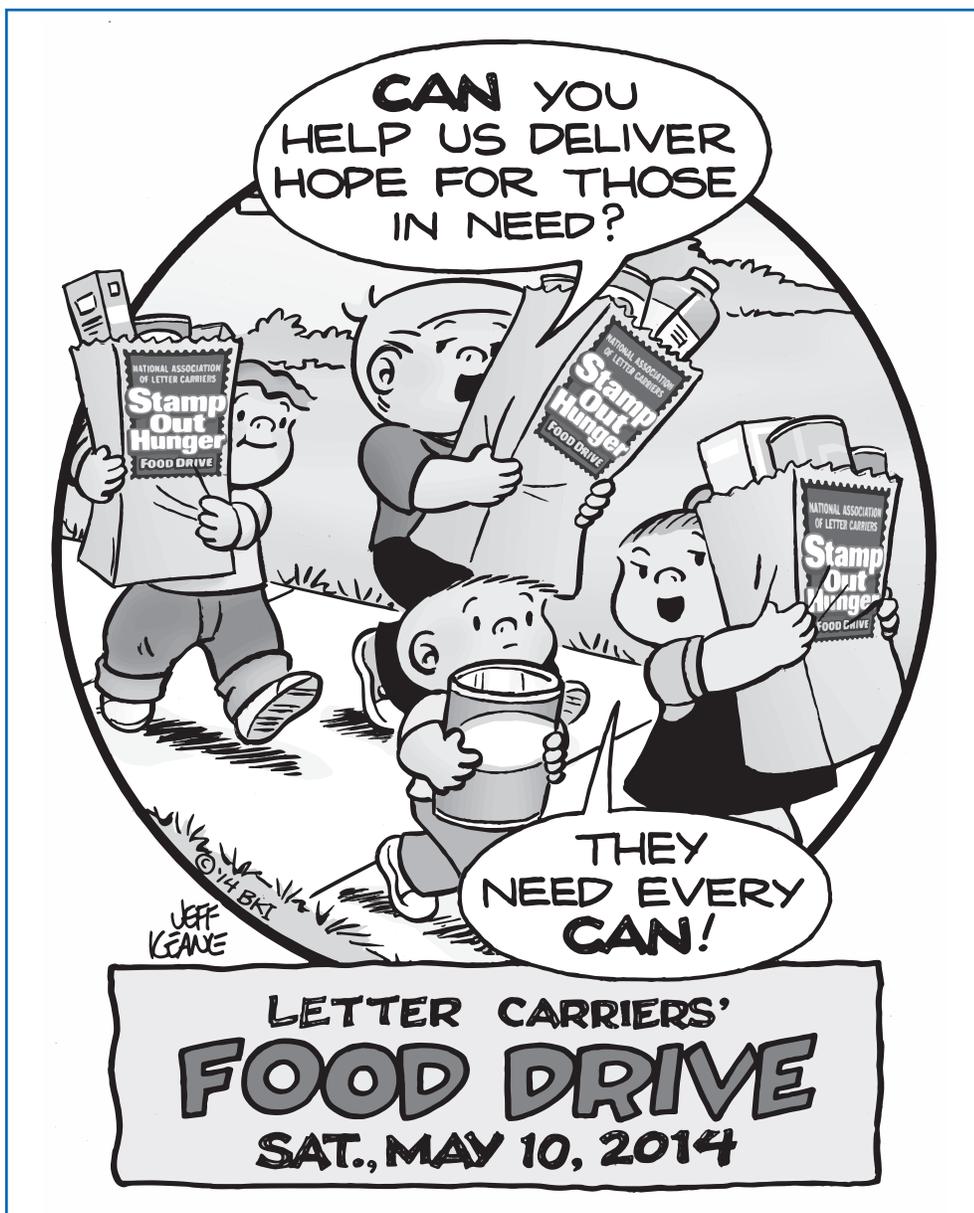
The next mayor of the city of Trenton must be able to earn the confidence of both the local and state communities. One without the other will not do. The other thing that will not do is a disenfranchised citizenry. In the space of those few hours on that Wednesday night, the mood moved from fear to hope. Citizens engaged and informed...the best way to begin change. ■

**Bridging opportunity gaps...
Helping families and communities
make the journey out of poverty.**

Mercer Street Friends is a Quaker affiliated, nonsectarian human care organization that works to reduce hunger and food insecurity, close education gaps, and improve the physical and emotional well-being of at-risk populations through its three divisions:

- Children and Youth Services
- Food Bank
- Parenting and Adult Services

To learn more about the programs and services of Mercer Street Friends, please visit our website at www.mercerstreetfriends.org.



STAMP OUT HUNGER FOOD DRIVE SET FOR SATURDAY, MAY 10th

On Saturday, May 10th the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) will “Stamp Out Hunger” across America by collecting nonperishable food donations to assist the millions of Americans who are struggling to put food on their tables every day.

Now in its 22nd year, the Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive is always held on the second Saturday in May, and the program has become the nation's largest single-day food drive.

In our area, letter carriers with NALC Branches 380 and 268 will collect food donations as they deliver the mail along their routes.

At the end of the day, all the food will be delivered to the Mercer Street Friends Food Bank and members of the NALC, MSF employees and other volunteers will unload the tractor trailers as they arrive and pile the donations as high as they can along the length of the warehouse.

Over the next few weeks, volunteers will process and fill the donations into banana boxes for distribution to our member agencies.

You can help Stamp Out Hunger by filling a sturdy bag with nonperishable food items such as tuna, canned soup, canned vegetables, pasta, rice, and cereal

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STAMP OUT HUNGER FOOD DRIVE continued from page 3

and place the bag next to your mailbox prior to the time of regular mail delivery on Saturday. You can also bring your donation to a local post office.

If you live in Princeton, Pennington, Hopewell or West Windsor, your carrier will leave a specially designed Stamp Out Hunger bag with the Mercer Street Friends logo on one side. Fill it to the brim!

With summer coming, low-income families are faced with the additional challenge of feeding children who receive subsidized breakfast and lunch during the school year, but not during the summer months. This food drive is critical to Mercer Street Friends as we prepare for the increased demand for food in the upcoming months. ■

MERCER STREET FRIENDS ENLISTS AN AFFORDABLE CARE ACT NAVIGATOR

Kyle Williams has been volunteering at the MSF Food Bank for years. His desire to make a difference in people's lives is what first brought him to the Food Bank, so he was pleased when the director of the Food Bank, Rucha Gadre, asked if he would be willing to train to become a certified Healthcare Navigator so that he could help families and individuals enroll for health insurance under the Affordable Care Act.

The part-time position, funded by a grant from the Food Bank of Monmouth and Ocean Counties, gave him a chance to educate people about their healthcare options and help them find the best healthcare coverage. It seemed like a perfect fit for Kyle, who is finishing a program in grant writing at Mercer

County Community College as he changes the direction of his career so that he can work in the non-profit sector.

"If you can give people the tools to manage their health, you can move them closer to self-sufficiency," Kyle observes. "Many of the people I helped sign up for healthcare had never had a primary care doctor – much less a dentist. They had no one to talk to about health issues."

Kyle focused much of his effort on assisting people who are already receiving services through Mercer Street Friends or other social service organizations in the Greater Trenton region. He quickly found that the majority of the people he spoke to did not meet the minimum income requirements for the Healthcare Marketplace, the paid insurance platform. Instead, they qualified for NJ Family Care, the state's insurance program for low-income individuals and families.

Kyle visited food pantries, social service non-profits and even signed people up at the Board of Social Services offices in Mercer County because they did not have the resources available to sign up eligible applicants for NJ Family Care.

"There are still so many people out there who have no idea how to work through the questions about eligibility, the forms – and definitely not the healthcare.gov website," remarks Kyle. "It's complicated for anyone, but it's almost impossible if you don't know much about computers, or if you don't understand or read English well. There is very little assistance

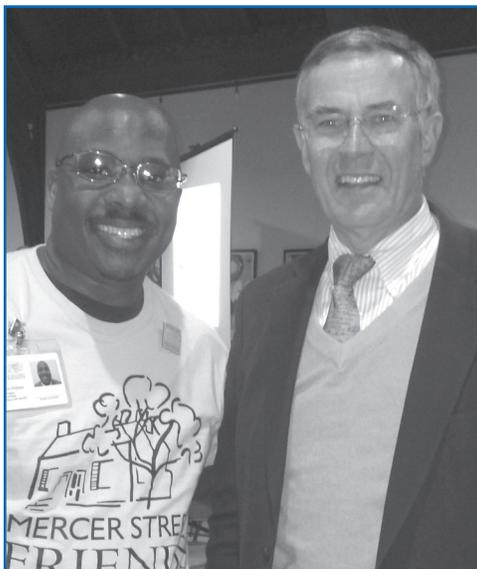
available to navigate the system for the people who need it most."

Kyle has enrolled over 200 people for health insurance under the Affordable Care Act. While the 2014 open enrollment ended on March 31, some people can still apply due to qualifying life circumstance such as getting married; having or adopting a child; moving out of state; or losing other health coverage due to a job loss or divorce. Kyle remains committed to helping people learn about their healthcare insurance options and navigate the system. ■

YEAR-ROUND CLASSES PUT MERCER STREET FRIENDS STUDENTS AT HEAD OF CLASS

Summer is a critical time for children living in poverty. Learning loss is a typical problem for students who are out of school over the summer. But for poor children, who already lag behind their peers in wealthier school districts on most education benchmarks, learning loss over the summer can be even more pronounced. At Mercer Street Friends, we are committed not only to preventing summer learning loss, but to using the summer to reinforce learning and to prepare students for the concepts they will learn in the next school year. To that end, Mercer Street Friends offers the only full-day, 12-month Abbott pre-school program in Trenton.

The Abbott pre-school programs were instituted by the state in response to the NJ Supreme Court's decision in the *Abbott v. Burke* case. The rulings cover 31 low-income urban school districts in the state, known as Abbott districts. The court ruled that the New Jersey Constitution requires the state to ensure that students in all school districts – even



Kyle Williams (left) and Rep. Rush Holt (NJ-12th)

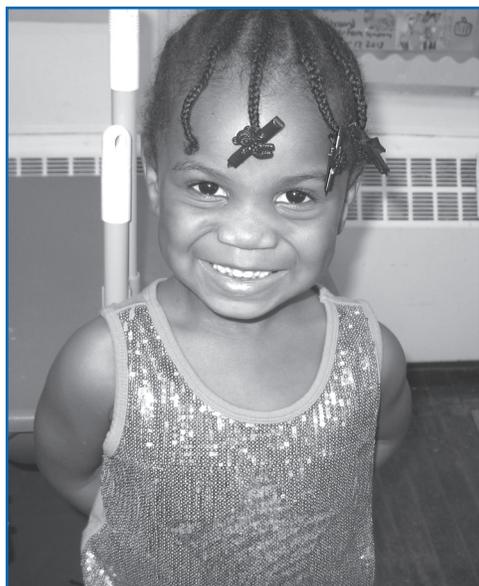
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the poorest – receive a “thorough and efficient” education.

In order to comply with the court’s rulings, the state now fully funds free public pre-school programs for children in Trenton and in the other Abbott districts. Initially, these Abbott pre-schools operated year-round but funding to the Abbott programs has been cut since the economic recession and the pre-schools are now funded only for the school year.

At Mercer Street Friends we have seen the difference to families and children that providing a 12-month, full-day pre-school makes. Parents can continue working over the summer, which is critical to low-income families. Children can reinforce the concepts they have already learned and teachers can begin to introduce the curriculum for the next school year to make the transition more fluid.

For many children, the pre-school offers a centering “constant” in a life that can include frequent changes in where the family lives, what they have to eat, where their parents work and many other factors. Lisa Banks, director of the Abbott Pre-School Program, says, “All children are ready and eager to learn but their environments can either maximize or diminish their potential to learn. We are invested in giving pre-schoolers the maximum potential to learn, which means giving them a year-round secure and stimulating environment in which they can develop their cognitive, social and emotional skills.” ■



PARENTING PROGRAM PARTICIPATES IN NATIONAL STUDY

Mercer Street Friends Chosen by U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for Study of Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program

Since 1996, Mercer Street Friends (MSF) has offered parenting education and child development support programming to at-risk families in Trenton through the Trenton Healthy Families-TIP Program. In 2010, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act authorized funding for a set of evidence-based home visitation models that provide services focused upon family well-being and self sufficiency.

The creation of the Maternal Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) benchmarks for measuring progress accompanied the expansion of federal funding of home visiting programs.

Home visiting programs like the ones administered by Mercer Street Friends operate around the country to help prevent child maltreatment, improve maternal and child health outcomes, and increase school readiness for families and children living in poverty. New funding provided through the Affordable Care Act has allowed Mercer Street Friends to serve 65 additional families in the Healthy Families-TIP and Parents as Teachers home visitation programs.

In 2013, MSF was selected to participate in the Mother and Infant Home Visiting Program Evaluation (MIHOPE), a legislatively mandated, large-scale assessment of the effectiveness of publicly funded family focused home visitation programs across the U.S. The major objectives of the study are to measure the effectiveness of several evidence based home visiting programs across a wide range of outcomes; to study the variation in how programs are implemented; and to analyze the data in order to create recommendations that will help to improve outcomes for at-risk families and children. Mercer Street Friends was recommended to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as a

participant in the MIHOPE study by the NJ Department of Children and Families.

Karen Hoppock, Director of Parenting and Adult Services at Mercer Street Friends is pleased to have the opportunity to be a part of the MIHOPE study. “It’s a chance for us to see valid proof of what we already know to be true: When we partner with parents, providing them with information and support that is both culturally informed and research based, and combine that with opportunities to practice new strategies in self care and nurturing care of their children, the whole family thrives. As we teach, we are also taught. Parents first open their homes to our parent educators and then open their hearts. They share their needs and challenges, goals and interests, in order to build a better life for themselves and their children,” explains Karen.

The MIHOPE study, led by MDRC (formerly referred to as Manpower Development Research Corporation), includes almost 5,100 families from 85 evidence-based home visitation programs throughout the country. James Bell Associates, Johns Hopkins University, University of Georgia, and Mathematica Policy Research are part of the MIHOPE research and technical support team with whom MSF staff interact on a monthly basis.

Karen is confident that the data gathered in the MIHOPE study will highlight the successful outcomes of home visiting programs; she has already observed such successes in the programs at Mercer Street Friends. If the efficacy of these programs are finally quantified, she hopes that it will lead to additional funding so that eligible families that could benefit from home visiting services in New Jersey – as well as other families across the country – can get the support they need to change their lives for the better. ■



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Circle of Friends

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