

No GED? Some undocumented immigrants hit barriers in quest for legal status

By Miranda Leitsinger, NBC News
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The government's new program offering young undocumented immigrants a reprieve from deportation presents an opportunity but also many challenges for an estimated 350,000 youths who didn't finish high school, many of whom may not be able to qualify because the barriers are too high, experts say.

The key hurdle is the educational requirement of the deferred action program. Immigrants must be enrolled in school, graduated from high school or have served in the military, and if they haven't, they'll need to get a GED, the equivalent of a high school degree, or enroll in an education, literacy, or career training program.

Some of those trying the GED route are hitting roadblocks. Gabriela de Jesus Diaz Bocardo, a 23-year-old immigrant from Mexico living in Phoenix, Ariz., is one of them. She has spent two months trying to find a prep class she could afford since a state law effectively prohibits undocumented immigrants from taking the free courses. One school told her a one-year program would cost her \$4,000, which was way beyond her means.

"I want to be enrolled in school, but I can't find a way ... I'm trying my hardest," said Diaz, who was unable to finish school after giving birth to her son and wants to return. "I would be so happy. ... Everyday waking up in the morning going to school, proving to my teachers that I am here early, trying to have a dream."

As Diaz and others have learned, merely getting into a GED prep course -- let alone taking the test -- won't be easy: Adult education serves about 2 million people nationwide though nearly 35 million don't have a high school diploma or its equivalent. This is mostly because the availability of services can't meet the demand, the Department of Education said in a statement.

Some 72 percent of adult education programs had waiting lists in 2010, according to a national survey by the National Council of State Directors for Adult Education.

"The federal funding for these kinds of services has been stagnant for years, and ... the states have been reducing their funding," said Lennox McClendon, the council's senior advisor. "So the opportunities for adult education in general have been waning."

Between 320,000 and 350,000 of the 1.7 million undocumented immigrants who are potentially eligible for deferred action are impacted by the education requirement, according to estimates from the Migration Policy Institute and the Pew Hispanic Center. They are 16 and older and do not have a high school diploma or GED, and are not currently enrolled in school.

Overall, the government had received some 180,000 applications for deferred action as of Oct. 12, with nearly 4,600 of them approved, according to the latest data.

“I think it’s fair to say that the immigrant rights movement is discovering the education reform movement ... and that they’re really coming to understand, first of all, how hard it is to get a GED and secondly, how limited the capacity of adult education programs is,” said Margie McHugh, co-director of the Migration Policy Institute’s National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy. “Certainly this 350,000 or so young people are the most immediate concern and the most vulnerable for not making it through the process, and that’s very much related to both the difficulty of pursuing a GED or completing a GED ... and also the lack of availability of programs.”

Some take exception to undocumented immigrants accessing such programs.

“I think it's perfectly legitimate to bar access to them because there are waiting lists,” said Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center of Immigration Studies, a think tank that supports tighter immigration controls. “I mean, there's obviously limited resources and in an environment of limited resources, allowing illegal immigrants to enroll would mean that legal immigrants or American citizens would not be able to get classes ... that's just math. There's no way to avoid that.”

Others feel it is unfair to set a requirement for some in the group that could be insurmountable.

“It offends me as someone who comes from poverty that they have set a system up where -- people, you know, that are more likely probably the poorest of the poor -- would never be able to take advantage of it. They give a break to people that are going to college or people that are in the military,” said Carol Swain, a professor of politics and law at Vanderbilt University who writes about immigration and did the GED after dropping out of high school. “If you’re going to give mercy to the group they should set up the criteria in a way that it takes in everybody and not exclude the people that are the poorest of the poor or the ones that would never qualify based on their standards.”

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Spike in requests in some states

The GED consists of five tests covering math, reading, science, language arts and social studies. It takes about seven hours to complete.

Some GED state testing centers are seeing a spike in requests to take the test or a course, as well as an uptick in calls with questions about the exam since the government began accepting applications for the deferred action program on Aug. 15, according to an informal survey of state

GED test program administrators conducted by the GED Testing Service, the official creator of the exam.

In Iowa, centers have experienced a 20 percent rise in English as a Second Language attendance for GED prep, while Massachusetts has seen a 25 percent to 50 percent surge in registration for the test through Spanish. In North Carolina, there has been a 5 percent to 10 percent increase in testing requests, including to take it in Spanish, prompting administrators to order more such tests for next year.

McLendon, who reviewed the GED Testing Service survey and conducted his own of state directors, said it's been "a mixed bag" so far.

"In some states there seems to be an impact. In other states there doesn't seem to be very much," he said. "It's going to be spotty. In some areas they will ... have easy access and some areas they won't. They will just have to wait for months, perhaps."

In Painesville, a community of 18,000 outside Cleveland, an immigrant rights' group knew the educational requirements would be a problem for those youth who were not the undocumented college graduates often seen leading the campaign for getting legal status.

"We've always known that the Latino dropout is very high here in northeast Ohio," said Veronica Dahlberg, executive director of HOLA, a grassroots group focusing on Latino advocacy and community organizing. "We immediately knew this was going to be an issue and started raising the money right away. We knew there was no way the local (adult education) program would meet the need in our town and I'm sure this is true in other areas as well."

Dahlberg contacted the local Adult Basic and Literary Education (ABLE) program, which told them they'd be happy to partner but had already allocated their annual budget. So HOLA began a fundraising drive, which included raffling off a car donated by a local pastor. The group raised about \$6,000 to pay for two ABLE teachers and four tutors, some of whom are bilingual.

On Sept. 10, they began with eight students in makeshift classrooms in the HOLA center. Today, they have 29. Some students are proficient in English and completed a lot of school, but a majority will have to take the test in Spanish.

"I never thought this would be as big as it's become. It's really great that the students ... want to learn, want to do better, want to get a better job," said Carol Darr, ABLE coordinator in Painesville.

Juan Maldonado, 20, and the oldest of six brothers who dropped out of high school after his dad was deported to Mexico two years ago, said many of the students were excited about having another option to get their diploma.

"You feel like now there are no limits to what you can do," he said.

Maldonado, who likes math but has trouble with grammar, said returning to school has taken on a whole different meaning since his first go-around.

“It actually feels really good knowing that I am doing something good for myself,” he said. “It is really important for me because I would like to be able to go back to some kind of career, so I could start my life.”

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