

Detroit center helps adults get GED and skills they need for jobs



By **Megha Satyanarayana**, Detroit Free Press Staff Writer

December 10, 2012



Walter Daniels, 68, of West Bloomfield offers one-on-one help as Shakur Pascoe, 33, of Southfield prepares for the GED at the St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center in Detroit. The center also helps students get more comfortable with computers and technology. / PHOTOS BY MANDI WRIGHT/DETROIT FREE PRESS



Erica Brooks, 23, of Detroit does math problems while studying for the GED.

A wall at the center celebrates students who have moved closer to their goals.



Randy Spivey believes he is one test away from a good job and a great life.

Since January, the 33-year-old Detroit resident has been in one-on-one GED tutoring at the St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center in northwest Detroit, where he has taken four of the five required tests to get his diploma. He said that after

17 years of odd jobs and hustling for a buck, he's looking at his four children -- ages 11, 7, 4, and 1 -- and realizing that they need him to do better.

"I have to show them," he said, adding that he can't tell them to do anything he hasn't done himself. In 2014, the format of the GED is changing. The exams will be available only by computer, and tests taken in 2013 won't apply to the 2014 series.

So, in the interests of those with fewer computer skills, places such as the St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center are trying to enroll as many students as possible in 2013. Their education programs reach people -- often parents like Spivey -- who now need a GED to work even the most basic jobs. Spivey, who was turned down for an entry-level line job at General Motors, is one of 275 active students at the center's three locations. He dropped out of Henry Ford High School when he was 16.

"You kind of don't have a choice anymore," Diane Renaud, the center's CEO, said of people without a diploma who are seeking a GED. "They're not just unemployed. They're unemployable."

Part of that inability to be employed is a lack of computer skills, which Renaud said is an extra hurdle to taking the tests online in 2014.

"The reality is that the disenfranchised community doesn't have home computers. They don't have a lot of handheld devices. The idea of taking a test on the computer is already intimidating, on top of the intimidation of the test itself," she said.

To combat this, in 2013, the center will create and use online lessons and other teaching tools to get their test-takers familiar with computers.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2011, 47% of Detroit's eighth-graders did not meet basic reading skill standards. The national average was 25%.

According to the 2011 U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, of the estimated 442,000 Detroit adults age 25 or older, nearly 100,000 are estimated not to have a high school diploma. In Michigan, 1.1 million people 16 or older don't have a high school diploma, according to the Michigan Workforce Development Agency.

The center has morphed significantly since its days as an orphanage in Farmington Hills. With changes in state law outmoding the orphanage, Renaud said that rather than become a foster care provider, the center turned its focus to education. With after-school programs for children and GED programs for adults, Renaud said the center is trying to help children do better in school by helping their parents.

When Terrance Davis left Cooley High School in Detroit, he was in the ninth grade and questioning the point of school. Like Spivey, the 20-year-old paid his bills by doing legal and illegal things until he realized his 11-year-old brother was watching.

In August, he started tutoring classes, and said good-bye to his circle of troublemaking friends. He said he thinks the one-on-one tutoring is why he's succeeding for the first time in his educational life and now dreams of starting a music business and revamping his old neighborhood on Detroit's west side. "I want to have a great life," he said.