The GED program gives adults a second chance at education

By Judy Stanford
Staff Writer

Angela Busby got her high school diploma last May onstage at the Heymann Performing Arts Center.

Graduation is a significant time in most people’s lives, but for Busby it was an especially happy event. She had been out of school for 14 years.

Busby quit school at the age of 15 because of financial problems in her family. Ever since then, she has felt unfinished business in her life.

“I had always wanted to go back, but I never had the opportunity,” she said.

Then, her employer at Stuller Setting initiated a program where she and other employees might attend adult education classes at her workplace.

Within a few months, Busby had her high school equivalency diploma. And this may not be the end of it for her. “I was maybe thinking of going to LSU and taking a few classes,” she said.

The General Education Development test was instituted about 50 years ago, according to Judy Cole, a teacher coordinator for the Lafayette Parish Adult Education Program. It began as a way to help people whose education had been interrupted, one way or another, by World War II.

The GED is available throughout the United States today, and here is a program in every parish in Louisiana.

There were 1945 students enrolled in the GED program in 1992-93, said E.J. Gautreaux, supervisor of Lafayette Parish Adult and Community Education. Nearly 400 of them have already passed the GED test.

There is no one profile that fits the returning student, Cole said.

They range from young people in their late teens and early 20s to people who have been out of school 10 or 20 years.

“We have people who have been injured, and they’re coming back,” Cole said, “because they can’t continue working in the oilfield.” And some are doing it just for the satisfaction.

Pauline Higgens quit school in 1955 to go to work for the telephone company. She quit her job to raise her children, but went back to work; this time for Sears, 17 years ago.

She recently retired from Sears and decided it was time to get her diploma.

Higgens, who received her GED in May, gives all the credit to the adult education teachers. “There’s no way you could fail,” she said. “They’re so patient.”

Higgens’ success in the GED program has inspired her into continuing her education. She now plans to go to nursing school.

“I think everyone should take advantage of this program,” she said.

The program in Lafayette Parish is free of charge, except for a $10 fee for the test itself. It’s easy to sign up. All a prospective student needs to do is call one of the adult education centers or just show up in person. Although a student may sign up for classes at the age of 16, he or she must be 17 to qualify to take the GED test.

After filling out a little paperwork and speaking with the staff, the student schedules a time to take the California Achievement Test.

Like the achievement tests that are given in school, this is a placement test. It tells the teacher at what grade level to begin.

Instruction is individualized. “Some people come in,” Cole said, “and are very proficient, for instance, in math or in reading. And so, they do not have to work on that skill when they enter the program.”

Once the student’s level is determined, he begins working on the skills that need improvement.

“When they have done all these assignments, they take the CAT again. Once they have scored a 13.0 on the CAT, we give them a practice GED,” Cole said. The score of 13.0 indicates the student is functioning at graduate level, and is required by Louisiana law to take the test.

Then, it’s on to the school board for the real thing. The GED test itself consists of five parts: writing skills, social studies, science, literature and the arts and mathematics.

“How long does it take and when do you start? It depends.

Some students just out of high school score a 13.0 on the initial CAT and go directly from there to taking the GED, without having to study at all. Those who score at about the 10th grade level may complete the test in three or four months. Those who score at 8th or 9th grade level may take considerably longer to complete their studies.

It also depends on how much time the student is willing or able to devote to studying. Class attendance is not mandatory.

“The whole idea behind adult education is to accommodate the adult,” Gautreaux said. “We may have someone working two weeks on and two weeks off. They come in when they can.”

Classes are available during the day and evening for working students.

Although the adult education classes coincide with the regular school year, it is an open entry program. Because instruction is custom-designed for each person, a student may enroll at any time during the year.

Cole said that 90 percent of employers and colleges nationwide will accept the GED as equivalent to a high school diploma. Under certain circumstances, so will some branches of the military.

Although the primary focus of the adult education program is to help people earn an equivalency diploma, that is not its only function.

Gautreaux said the program’s secondary mission is to help anyone who already has a diploma but needs remediation.

Some people will attend adult education classes to sharpen their skills in some subject area in order to qualify for a better position at work. Some may want to improve certain skills before entering vocational school or college.

This service is also provided free of charge.

Although the GED program is an excellent opportunity at a second chance, Gautreaux and Cole both caution students that it is not meant to take the place of the senior year of high school.

“We counsel every parent of the