

Nontraditional high school graduates: Update on pilot program

What we examined

It is well known that high school graduates are more successful in the military than those who drop out of school. But as more and more high school graduates go to college, it is important for the Services to look at other pools of potential recruits. The Conference Report of the National Defense Authorization Act of Fiscal Year 1999 directed the establishment of a 5-year pilot program requiring the Services to treat two groups as high school diploma graduates for purposes of enlistment:

- Graduates of homeschools
- Graduates of the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program who also have GED certificates.

The Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Force Management Policy) asked CNA to compare homeschooled and GED-holding ChalleNGe graduates with other recruits. We published an earlier report on these recruits after 12 months of service. Our new report looks at them after 24 and 36 months of service.

The cost of replacing recruits who do not fulfill their enlistment obligations is substantial. Traditionally, recruits with GEDs or other alternate credentials have higher attrition rates than conventional high school graduates. For this reason, the Services sharply restrict their enlistment. Because of the importance of attrition for

force planning, attrition rates are our primary outcome measure; however, we also examine other measures.

What we found

We find that both homeschooled and ChalleNGe recruits have much higher attrition rates than traditional high school graduates. Our earlier report found relatively low 12-month attrition rates for some of ChalleNGe and homeschooled recruits. But as we tracked them further, we found that attrition rates rose sharply for all of these groups by the 24- and 36-month points. Across the board, recruits with these backgrounds are less likely to complete their enlistments.

We then examined other measures, including initial aptitude, type of discharge, presence of waivers, and reason for separation. In general, our findings match up with our attrition measures; homeschooled and ChalleNGe GED recruits are not strong recruits by these measures either.

Other factors linked to attrition

We looked at other dimensions of education and factors frequently related to education. Age of the recruit is related to attrition, and that relationship differs by education. For example, those who enlist at age 17 have higher attrition rates than those who enlist at 18, regardless of education credential. While there is little difference in attrition between traditional diploma graduates who enlist at 18 and those who are older at enlistment, recruits with other credentials who enlist at age 20 or more have relatively low attrition.

Another factor that influences attrition is attitude toward completing high school. Recruits who even *considered* leaving high school attrite at higher rates than otherwise similar recruits, even if the recruits did in fact complete high school. In other words, those who considered leaving school but actually stayed and earned degrees still have substantially higher attrition rates than other traditional diploma graduates.

We find that those who have been expelled from a school—both traditional diploma graduates and those holding alternate credentials—attrite at higher rates. Among those without high school diplomas, people who persisted in school into the twelfth grade before leaving have lower attrition rates than others. Finally, enlistees holding certificates of completion or attendance have markedly lower attrition rates than others without high school diplomas. In fact, attrition rates of those holding such certificates are roughly equivalent to those of high school diploma graduates. People most often hold such certificates because they completed all coursework but failed a standardized test required for graduation. As states increasingly enact and enforce end-of-year and graduation tests, we expect that the number of certificate holders will increase; this group may be a good source of recruits.

In the course of the study, we found other factors related to attrition. In some cases, we are not certain how the factors are associated with attrition. We find that smoking before enlistment increases early attrition, but the relationship between smoking and attrition does not seem to be driven solely by differences in physical fitness. We find that married women attrite at higher rates than single women, while married and single men attrite at about the

same rates, suggesting that it is not marital status *per se* that affects attrition. In these cases, more research is necessary to pin down the causal pathway.

The implications

Based on our results, the data do not support treating either homeschooled or ChalleNGe GED graduates as high school diploma graduates for purposes of recruiting. We also identify a range of other factors associated with attrition. They could help better select recruits or could help the Navy target programs to those most at risk of attriting.

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