



Photo: Goodwill of Central & Southern Indiana

# A second chance: Adult learners complete high school diplomas and increase their options

## Key Results

- The Excel Center® is a successful, cost-effective solution for high school dropouts.
- After 5 years, graduates increase earnings by 39% compared to their peers.
- Graduates are more likely to be working and have college credits than their peers.
- All graduates - regardless of race, gender or demographics - experience similar earnings outcomes.

### Context of the Issue

There is a high school dropout problem in Indiana. In 2019, more than 12% of students did not finish high school. Those who drop out have significantly worse labor market outcomes than peers. Hoosiers without a high school diploma earn, on average, less than \$10,000 per year and 37% less than those with a high school diploma as their highest credential. Adult learners have unique needs that are not one-size-fits-all, often balancing otherwise busy lives with full-time work while managing a household and caring for children. Hoosiers driven to finish high school as adults often have to choose between convenience and potential earnings. There is a solution that meets adult learners where they are, leads to higher earnings and has the evidence to prove it: The Excel Center.

### Current Efforts

In 2019, almost 470,000 Hoosiers ages 25 and over had not earned a high school diploma (or equivalent). When one of these adults wants to return to school, they are typically directed to the High School Equivalency (HSE) test.<sup>1</sup> However, completion of an HSE is not common—in 2015, just over 6,600 Hoosiers successfully passed. Their earnings gains are minimal: students who barely pass the General Educational Development test (another high school equivalency test) see less than a 10% increase in earnings. A high school diploma will potentially trump an HSE when an employer compares two similar job applicants. A high school diploma offers something significantly different than the HSE test. In the process of completing the diploma, the student builds soft skills in such areas as attendance, persistence and interpersonal interaction. Where available,

the high school diploma can support learning for those whose educational needs cannot be met by traditional Adult Basic Education and the HSE test. Importantly, the HSE may simply evaluate whether one has skills or not, while the Excel Center experience is as much about a process of building skills as it is about completing the diploma. Despite this range of benefits, options for adults to complete a high school diploma are extremely limited.

### Innovative Solution: The Excel Center

Founded by Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana, The Excel Center is a tuition-free, public charter high school that supports adult learners in completing their state-certified high school diploma. The Excel Center provides small classes on a flexible schedule, assistance with transportation, and on-site child care in order to address the major barriers to being in class and ready to learn. Life coaches mentor students to help them navigate challenges, to assist in building soft skills necessary for the workforce, and to focus on postsecondary goals and preparedness such as credits towards an undergraduate degree or industry-recognized certifications. Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana operates 15 Excel Center locations across Indianapolis and other parts of central and southern Indiana; there are three additional locations in northern Indiana. The collective Excel Center network includes 31 schools across five states and Washington, D.C.—all operated by local Goodwill organizations—with a goal of serving 30 total states by 2030.

<sup>1</sup> Indiana changed from administering the General Educational Development (GED) test to the High School Equivalency (HSE) test in 2014.



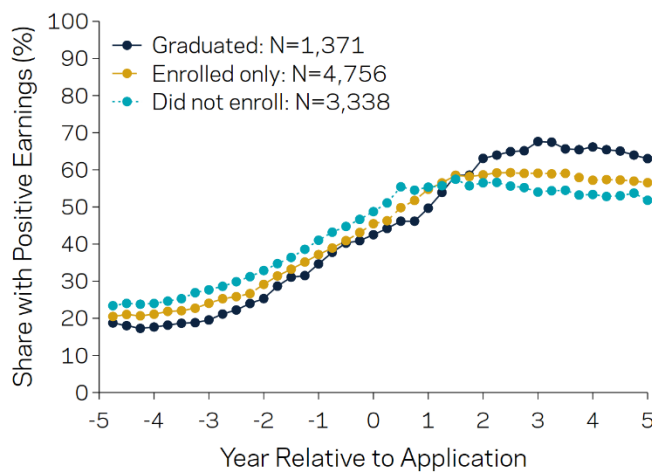
## LEO's Study

LEO performed a rigorous, quasi-experimental study to evaluate the impact of The Excel Center's specialized approach. The study sample included all applicants to The Excel Center from January 2013 through June 2015. Three groups of applicants were studied: (a) those who applied to the program but did not enroll; (b) those who applied and enrolled but did not complete the program; and (c) those who both enrolled in and completed the program—with individuals in group (a) and (b) serving as a comparison group of "peers" to group (c). LEO researchers linked application records from the Excel Center with education and labor market data from the Indiana Management Performance Hub. LEO used earnings and employment data from five years after a student's application to The Excel Center in order to analyze changes in earnings over time.

## Major Findings

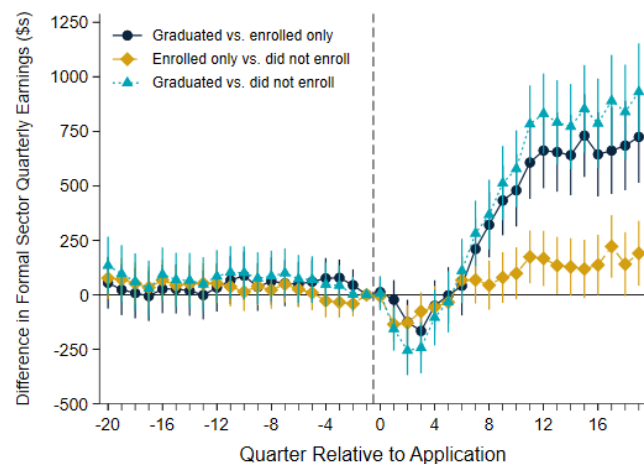
**Higher employment:** Excel Center graduates are 11 percentage points more likely to be employed in the formal sector than their peers (63% versus 52%).

Figure 1. Percent of Applicants with Formal Sector Employment



**Higher earnings:** Excel Center graduates see a 39% increase in their earnings in 5 years (\$13,028 annual income for graduates versus \$9,252 for peers), when controlling for observable characteristics.

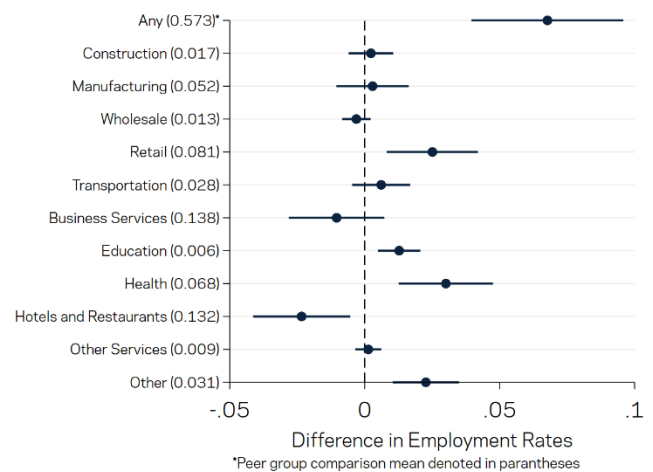
Figure 2. Differences in Annual Earnings



**More college credits and certificates earned:** Excel Center graduates are 18.5 percentage points more likely to earn college credits and 47.9 percentage points more likely to earn professional and course certificates.

**More career opportunities:** Excel Center graduates are 3 percentage points more likely to be employed in the health sector than their peers (10% versus 7%).

Figure 3. Probability of Employment in Different Sectors



**No differences across groups:** Excel Center graduates see similar increases in earnings regardless of gender, race, socioeconomic background, or geography.

## Lasting State Benefit

At a cost of \$6,750 per student per year, the total cost for an Excel Center graduate is \$10,000. An Excel Center graduate is projected to make higher earnings over their lifetime, increasing the benefit to the individual and potentially to society through decreased use of public benefits and increased tax payments.

## Key Takeaways

- Graduates of The Excel Center make more money, work in higher opportunity jobs, and earn more college credits and professional certificates more than their peers.
- The Excel Center costs the same as other charter schools, and has more advantages for adult dropouts than the common HSE alternative.
- The Excel Center is a proven model to help people who drop out of high school course-correct.