

JOHN D. TULENKO: This week's podcast, "Disappearing Dropouts," exposes how high schools in Florida avoid accountability for failing to educate thousands of teenagers. We were nominated for an Emmy award for this piece, but lost to Dan Rather and the CBS Evening News.

JOHN MERROW: Lakeisha Simmons has turned her life around. Once a high school dropout, she's gotten a fresh start.

LAKEISHA SIMMONS: I knew I had goals in life that I wanted to succeed in, and the only way for me to get to most of them was to get a high school diploma or a GED.

JOHN MERROW: As it has for millions of others, the GED, or General Education Degree, provided Lakeisha with a second chance at earning a high school diploma.

JOHN MERROW: Was it hard work?

LAKEISHA SIMMONS: Yes. Yes, it was. It's all on you. If you take the time to work and learn, then you'll succeed and you can get it done fast.

But you have some people who are there just to be there, and feel like it will be easy to get your GED; you just have to sit there. But it's not like that at all.

JOHN MERROW: Lakeisha applied herself and passed the GED. Today she attends community college and hopes to move up to a university.

LAKEISHA SIMMONS: If I'm lucky enough, I will be at Emory University trying to get into premed so I can specialize in neurology. But I'm determined, so I'm hoping to get there.

JOHN MERROW: It's always been dreams of a second chance that's brought people to the GED, but in recent years, there's been a crucial change in the makeup of students, one that's gone largely unnoticed except by teachers.

JOE KEEZEL: They're much younger. They're seventeen to twenty. That's much younger.

JOHN MERROW: For most of his 38 years of teaching GED class, Joe Keezel's students were older adults. That's who the GED was intended to serve. Today Keezel's seats are filled by teenagers, many referred here by their schools.

JOHN MERROW: Why is that happening?

JOE KEEZEL: It's because of the demands of the secondary schools. They're having them required to take language, Algebra, science. They have to pass the F-CAT. It's all academic. Many of them are not academically talented.

JOHN MERROW: Today in Florida, high schools refer thousands of struggling teens to the GED. How many of them earn the diploma? The pass rate for teens is about the same as it was in Lakeisha Simmons' class.

Tell me about your classmates. Did you have a sense of how many actually made it through?

LAKEISHA SIMMONS: In the time that I was there, I believe only two or three of us passed the test, out of a class of at least over 20.

JOHN MERROW: But many of those who do earn the GED will find it doesn't take them very far. In Florida, GED graduates rarely finish community college, and studies suggest the GED may not open many doors in the workplace either.

If there are questions about the value of the GED, then why are Florida high schools referring more and more teenagers to these programs? The answer may have something to do with graduation rates, a critical measure now being used to hold schools accountable.

Joel Martinez's story illustrates the connection. Because of a learning disability, Joel had difficulty reading and struggled in school. He failed eighth grade, but was promoted anyway. He failed ninth grade and was promoted again. How's that possible?

JOEL MARTINEZ: I don't know. I just went with the flow. I was like, "okay, they must think I'm smart, I guess." I went from failing eighth grade twice to going to ninth, and then from ninth going to tenth. I must be doing something right, but I don't know what it is.

JOHN MERROW: Joel reached tenth grade at Colonial High School still far behind in reading. He continued to fail. His counselor recommended the GED.

JOEL MARTINEZ: In school we heard a lot... the GED is a lot quicker. You have less problems. You don't have to worry about high school credits. You don't have to worry about this; you don't have to worry about that.

You go, take your test, get your GED, and you're done. That's it. Who wouldn't? Who wouldn't? I would, you know, get my GED and just be over with it. But it wasn't as simple as that.

JOHN MERROW: After he'd withdrawn from school, Joel was no longer the school system's charge. Though only 16 at the time, he was not required to show up for GED classes, and he never went. Instead, he spent two years mostly sleeping late and hanging out with friends.

JOHN MERROW: Were you a high school dropout?

JOEL MARTINEZ: Yeah. I would say I'm a high school dropout, yeah.

JOHN MERROW: But officially Joel was never counted as a dropout. On his school records, he's a W26, code for a student referred to a GED program.

When calculating their graduation rates, Florida schools remove all these students from their rolls.

KAREN WILSON: If they're totally withdrawn from here, then they're not going to count against us. So in essence, they then improved our graduation rate if they withdraw from Evans High School.

JOHN MERROW: Karen Wilson just started as principal in Orlando. Like most principals, she's under intense pressure from her state and from the federal law known as No Child Left Behind to lower the dropout rate and raise the graduation rate.

JOHN MERROW: So if you counsel a kid into GED, you benefit?

KAREN WILSON: The graduation rate would benefit.

JOHN MERROW: Evans' graduation rate has improved. In the last year, it was calculated, Evans referred 271 failing students into GED programs, thus taking them off its own rolls.

That same year, its graduation rate rose from 61 percent to 66 percent, enough to satisfy state and federal requirements. But at the same time, the actual number of diplomas handed out fell from 412 to 354.

JOHN MERROW: The number of graduates dropped and yet the graduation rate went up. Does that compute?

KAREN WILSON: No, it does not compute. I'm a high school math teacher, too. That's in my past life. So it was very curious for me to see that.

JOHN MERROW: A cynic might say the schools are gaming the system, figuring out how to get around accountability. Is that happening?

KAREN WILSON: Well, I don't do that with the GED program, but I think that maybe it's been overused, maybe misused. I don't know. I wasn't here.

But I don't think that's the first thing we offer a student. I know it's certainly not the first thing I offer.

JOEL MARTINEZ: Somebody should be held accountable for my learning problems, for not being able to learn in eighth, ninth, and tenth grade. They just wanted to get me out of school, and that's not right.

JOHN MERROW: So those kids who were sent off to a GED, who signed the paper, what do you know about their whereabouts today?

KAREN WILSON: Well, they were enrolled in a GED program, and I'm trusting and hoping that they did attend.

JOHN MERROW: Evans High School has its own GED program right on campus, but the night we were there, there wasn't a teenager in sight. In two years, Evans has transferred 440 students into GED programs. In that same time, only 14 enrolled.

KAREN WILSON: That's not good. I think it's important to know where they are, and I have to tell you, after I've asked the question and thought about it, I'm going to find out. I'm really going to find out.

If we don't have a system... there may be a system in place in Orange County to track the students. I do know that they do come back to the schools in the fall, and they ask the guidance counselors to find out where your graduates are, but no one has asked me, "Where did your GED students go?"

JOHN MERROW: Here's what we've learned. Last year in Orlando, high schools transferred 1,201 teenagers to the GED; 315 actually enrolled and 135 earned a diploma. That leaves 886 teenagers unaccounted for.

KAREN WILSON: I had not heard those numbers. That's very disheartening because we all lose. We all lose. Where are they now? Where did they go, in the streets?

That's pretty shocking, to know that they withdrew and they never went on with their education.

JOHN MERROW: As for Joel Martinez, after years spent without a high school diploma, he's now re-enrolled in a GED program. No longer a teenager, he works night shifts at a factory, sleeps three hours, and wakes up for school. He's further behind than ever.

JOEL MARTINEZ: I want to give up. I mean, every day I wake up, "God, I can't do this. I cannot do this." It's sickening because I don't know how to read.

And I swear, I say it, "If I knew how to read, life would be a lot easier for me." It would. You know, and if I can't get my GED, than I can't get nothing in my life.

JOHN MERROW: In time, the No Child Left Behind reforms-- more testing, more attention to results-- may prevent students from failing in the first place.

At the moment, however, thousands of Florida teenagers are disappearing from the rolls. Last year, the number of failing students transferred to the GED rose from 11,615 to 17,144.