

Fulfilling Dreams In Adult Education: Managing The Multi-Level Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Have you ever wondered how Laura Ingalls Wilder taught all of her students in the little one-room school house in The Little House on the Prairie series? How did she teach students on so many different levels and all at the same time? Well, that is exactly what it is like in most adult education classrooms today. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of adult education and how to successfully manage a multi-level classroom. Moreover, many individuals are becoming aware of the wonderful opportunities that are available once they earn their High School Equivalency Diploma (GED). However, there is a variation in the number of hours that students spend in preparation for their GED. Therefore, this paper will include one year of various data including statistics on attendance hours for various levels of adult education students as well as the amount of progress made depending on hours of attendance. Some students do not require classroom time at all; however, other students require classroom study time, but at different time lengths because they enroll at different educational levels. Numerous students study many hours in the adult education classroom in preparation for the GED test before actually taking the test. Furthermore, having the proper classroom setting is essential in order for them to be successful. Managing students at varying educational levels while in a single classroom can be very challenging and overwhelming, or even frightening at times. However, teaching effectively in a multi-level classroom can be accomplished and many dreams can be fulfilled. Walt Disney once said, "All our dreams can come true – if we have the courage to pursue them."

Keywords: Adult Education, GED, Multi-Level classroom, High School Equivalency Diploma, Bluegrass Community & Technical College, Kentucky Adult Education, Rebecca Haley

INTRODUCTION

*N*ationwide, seven thousand students become high school dropouts each school day (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). That is an alarming statistic! However, Kentucky's leaders realize the importance of an education. The mission of Kentucky Adult Education is to assist the almost 786,000 adults in Kentucky who dropped out of high school to earn their High School Equivalency Diploma or otherwise known as the GED (Kentucky Adult Education Profile, 2007). The first GED tests were established in 1942 during the World War II era. The tests were designed as a way of assisting World War II veterans earn their high school diploma without having to return to high school. In fact, "the GED Testing Program has served as a bridge to education and employment for an estimated 15.2 million people over its 60-year history. About one in seven high school diplomas issued in the United States each year is based on passing the GED Tests." (American Council on Education, 2007)

More and more individuals are becoming aware of the wonderful opportunities that are available once they earn their GED. One of those opportunities is the fact that many more doors open for people once they have obtained their GED. Walt Disney once said, "All our dreams can come true – if we have the courage to pursue them." Earning a GED is a dream that has been fulfilled by many students who have gone through the Bluegrass Community & Technical College's Adult Education Program in Lexington, Kentucky. In the past two years alone, 557 students achieved their GED through the BCTC Adult Education Program (Kentucky Adult Education Reporting Network). That is great news and a wonderful accomplishment for all individuals involved in the process.

The fact that numerous students study many hours in preparation for the GED test, having the proper classroom setting is essential in order for them to be successful.

MULTI-LEVEL CLASSES

Multi-level classes provide wonderful opportunities to all involved. Students who are functioning at a lower grade level can interact with those at a higher grade level. Students at varying levels and varying ages often appreciate what they can learn from one another in a small classroom. As an adult education instructor for Bluegrass Community and Technical College, I have been given the challenge of teaching students ranging from the sweet age of 16 and up. I have discovered there really is no age limit to learning. Learning is truly a life-long process, and we are never too young or old to learn.

I currently teach in a multi-level classroom. In Kentucky, anyone at least 16 years of age and officially withdrawn from public school may enroll in our adult education programs. In my classroom, the average age of my students is 26. Currently, my youngest student is 16 and my oldest is 61. So the variation of age can make for a pretty interesting class at times. However, I have found that the mix of age groups seems to work well. Most of the students have the goal of attaining their GED; however, some students that I serve already have a high school diploma or a GED, and they just need to refresh their basic skills for a specific job or for enrolling in college. In addition, this year, I have begun to administer the WorkKeys test which is required to obtain a Kentucky Employability Certificate (KEC). This certificate indicates to employers what skills individuals possess and whether or not they are qualified for a certain job. So far, this particular test is striking a pleasing appeal to the students. Almost all of my students want to earn their KEC in addition to earning their GED. With the broad spectrum of students that I serve, I find it takes a certain mix of classroom structure in order to make it all work.

Designing a successful multi-level classroom takes some time. As with anything, you learn from your mistakes. Over the years, I have tried several different approaches to teaching in this multi-level world of adult education. I have experienced the open classroom/open enrollment style in which students are free to enroll on any given day at any given time while currently enrolled students sit in the classroom and study at their own pace with my assistance if needed. I have not found this method to be very effective. Students who suddenly decide they want to enroll in the program show up at the classroom location unexpected. It's almost like they wake up one morning and think they need to get their GED today. Today is that magical word here. When many students decide they are ready to enroll and get their GED, they think they can come to the classroom and get their GED that exact day. I've actually had students come in to enroll and tell me they have to get their GED today because they have already told someone else, such as an employer, that they have their GED. When in reality, that is just not possible. So when that happens, the instructor must stop whatever he/she is doing and take care of the new student. In order for the new arrival to officially enroll, they must fill out the required paperwork and complete an assessment. These tasks are very difficult to achieve for both the new student and the instructor while other students are in the classroom needing assistance. Someone, either the new student or the student who is already enrolled, will not get the attention that they deserve from the instructor. In an open classroom setting, someone always needs assistance; so if the instructor is tied up with enrolling a new student, it makes it very difficult to help the student who has taken the time to come to class and receive help. The currently enrolled student has to wait for help, and often they will give up. Therefore, I have found that this method does not work very well.

Another approach for serving adult education students involves enrolling students at interval times and assigning students to certain classes depending on their grade level. For example, a few years ago I set a schedule that allowed for enrollment of new students every eight weeks. While this approach may sound like it is a good idea, which it did at first, it is not the best way to serve a large number of students. In our program, each instructor is required to serve a large number of students in order to meet our enrollment obligations to the state. If we don't meet those obligations, the program is placed on probation and at worst case scenario could lose funding from the state. Consequently, setting up the classroom in which students may only enroll every eight weeks is not a good way to enroll large numbers of students. What happens is that a student who decides that they want to enroll, but not on the scheduled date every eight weeks, must wait. When a drop-out student is told they must wait another few weeks before they can enroll, they often change their mind and do not return on the enrollment day. Sadly, many of

those students never return to enroll. However, there are some students who will wait until the scheduled enrollment date rolls around a few weeks later. Those are the dedicated students who have made up their mind that earning a GED is something they really want to do. It is not just a spur of the moment thought for them like it is for the students who do not return. The problem with setting up an adult education classroom in which students can only enroll at interval times such as eight weeks is that many students disappear back out into the population. Furthermore, enrollment numbers for the program suffer.

The eight week enrollment approach with scheduled classes does work for some students though. At the end of the eight week sessions, all the students retest to check for progress being made. The students who were enrolled at the beginning of the eight weeks and attended their scheduled classes made progress, but it doesn't matter whether students make progress or not if the overall enrollment number is not met for the year. If the target enrollment number for the program is not met for the year, regardless of how many students do actually make progress, the program is at risk of losing funding to continue services. Lack of sufficient enrollment numbers seems to be the ultimate decision-maker of deciding how to offer adult education services. Therefore, our program is continually trying to come up with the perfect solution of serving students effectively as well as reaching our target enrollment number for the year.

As a result of trying to come up with the perfect solution for enrolling adult education students, I have also tried enrolling students every three weeks and offering structured classes. With this approach, students must show up on the scheduled enrollment date to enroll and then they are assigned to certain classes depending on their enrollment test scores. However, this method has its downfalls, too. Although students may enroll more frequently with the three week method than with the eight week method, some students still fall through the crack. In adult education, we have students who do not like to wait. They want to enroll on the day they decide to enroll, and they do not want to wait three weeks to do it. The three week method is effective as far as students making progress is concerned. With this method, students are assigned to scheduled structured classes for three weeks. At the end of the three weeks, everyone retests to indicate progress being made. Although many students make progress with this approach, total enrollment numbers still continue to be lower than expected. When students are only allowed to enroll every three weeks, overall enrollment numbers are less than if students were allowed to enroll more frequently. So, once again, a new approach must be taken.

SUBJECTS TAUGHT IN THE MULTI-LEVEL CLASSROOM

Not only is it a challenge to teach multi-level students in one classroom, it is also a challenge to teach a wide variety of subjects at the same time. Not every student will require assistance in each subject, but many students require review work in several subject areas. The GED consists of five subjects including Language Arts, Writing; Language Arts, Reading; Social Studies; Science; and Mathematics (Kentucky Adult Education). When considering the many subjects that students must be prepared for in order to pass the GED test, students often need to improve their skills in more than one area. So, how exactly can a classroom be designed in order to serve students on multi-levels, as well as provide classroom instruction on a wide variety of subjects.

THE MULTI-LEVEL CLASSROOM THAT WORKS

The enrollment procedure that I currently use seems to actually work. After fourteen years in the adult education field, I think I have finally found the solution for managing the adult education classroom. I have spent the last nine years trying different classroom approaches, and the procedure I currently have in place seems to work best for my students. I do realize, however, that this technique may not be the most effective in a different setting or environment, but it seems to work well for the educational setting in which I am located. The technique that I currently use is to offer an enrollment day each week for new students. This approach allows students to enroll weekly. Most students will wait a week for something, but when they find out they have to wait multiple weeks, the story is much different. With the weekly enrollment process, I set aside Monday mornings for enrollment and assessment. Students are advised what time to arrive for assessment before the enrollment day. I have a schedule posted for enrollment. So if someone shows up to enroll, but it is not an enrollment day, they are given the schedule indicating the day and time they need to return in order to get started on achieving their dreams. This method allows

for structured classes to take place for currently enrolled students without having interruptions from new students who want to enroll. Did I mention that I am responsible for enrolling students as well as teaching students? Yes, that can be a difficult task, but I have learned to wear more than one hat at a time. This weekly enrollment method allows for all new students to complete the required registration forms and complete the initial assessment at the same time. Everything flows so much easier when all students are in sync with one another. At the conclusion of the registration process, students are given the results of their initial assessment before they leave. They are very anxious to find out where they stand and how long it’s going to take them to achieve their goals. When the students find out that they will know exactly what their test results are on the day they enroll, they are very responsive in completing the task of assessment.

Once the students complete the registration process, including the initial assessment, they are instructed when to start classes. The great part about this method is that students begin their classes the very next day! This is perfect for the impatient students who do not like to wait and who wake up one morning and decide- Hey, I think I will go get my GED today. Enrolling students on a weekly basis is perfect for trying to meet the state enrollment target goal. Fewer students will slip through the cracks if they are given multiple opportunities to enroll in an adult education program. Having the proper process of enrolling and serving students in place is of utmost importance in managing a multi-level classroom.

The multi-level classroom can be difficult to manage unless it is set up appropriately and in a workable fashion. In adult education, students enroll at varying education levels. In my classroom, students range from functioning at the first grade level all the way up to the post-secondary level. At times, it is very difficult to try to serve all levels of students simultaneously. However, with my approach, I think I’ve found the trick. The following table (Table 1) indicates the class schedule for my classroom. Please note that there are not any classes scheduled on Friday, and all the classes are scheduled during the daytime hours. No evening classes are offered at my location; however, there are other instructors within our program who conduct evening classes at other locations.

Table 1
Pre-registration is required for all classes

Monday	9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.	Registration/Assessment (no appointment necessary)
	1:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.	Assessments (WorkKeys, OPT, & TABE - pre-registration required)
Tuesday	9:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.	Class/Open Lab
	11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.	Writing Review
	1:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.	Class/Open Lab
Wednesday	9:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.	Class/Open Lab
	10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.	Math Blast
Thursday	9:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.	Class/Open Lab
	11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.	Writing Review
	1:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.	Class/Open Lab

Keeping the schedule above in mind, please remember that students are attending the classes with varying levels of education. The Class/Open Lab sessions are for everyone. Those scheduled times are for students who want to study individually at their own pace, but with instructor assistance if needed. Attendance for the Class/Open Lab sessions is flexible. I think adult education students need flexibility. Adults have responsibilities other than attending class. Many of my students have children and are working either part-time or full-time. With those other obligations, I realize that it is sometimes difficult to be able to attend class daily. I have the philosophy that family comes first. So if one of my student’s children is sick, I understand if they are not in attendance on that day. However, I also tell them that while I realize that their children or family members may get sick sometimes, that they can’t be sick everyday. In other words, I expect my students to attend class each day unless there is a medical emergency and a family member needs their immediate attention. In addition to sickness, students sometimes need

to miss class because they have a job and are required to be there on a certain day. I emphasize the work ethic, so if I know they are missing class because they are at work, it is ok. I do stress the importance of working, but I also stress the importance of trying to get students to work with their employer to adjust their working hours so they may attend class in addition to being employed. Therefore, our class schedule is very flexible. The Class/Open Lab sessions offer the most flexibility. Students may arrive at the beginning of the session or anytime after the session has started.

Flexibility is important when working with adult students; however, the right amount of structure is also needed in order for students to be successful. Mixed in with the Class/Open Lab sessions are structured classes. There is a Writing Review class that meets two times each week. There is also a Math Blast class that meets weekly for two hours. Those structured classes provide students with group instruction with the entire class involved in the same subject at the same time. Whereas, the Class/Open Lab classes provide students the flexibility to work on whatever subject they need to work on when they want to work on it.

The structured classes are almost like attending a boot camp. The classes provide students with a lot of information in a short amount of time. Adult education students are trying to cram a lot of different subjects in at the same time. Math and Writing seem to be the most difficult for them. That is why I have chosen those two particular subjects for structured classes. A syllabus is provided to each student for the structured classes which indicate what material will be covered on a scheduled date for class. There is not a start and an end date for the structured classes; instead, the classes continuously cycle throughout the year. With new students enrolling in the program on a weekly basis, this seems to be a good solution for serving adult education students. Students can attend as many classes or as few classes as they need until they accomplish their goals. With the continuous cycle of classes, students can even repeat particular classes if needed. Because of the needed flexibility in adult education, students reassess very frequently. They need to see how much progress they are making within a given time period. It is a mistake to make students wait an extended time before reassessing their skills. If you do so, they will disappear. They need to frequently see results of their hard efforts. Therefore, my students reassess every two to three weeks if I believe progress is being made. This confirms to the student that they are, in fact, on the right track.

Students participating in the program attend classes with varying number of classroom hours. Some of the students will require numerous hours of class work before they are ready to take the actual GED test; however, other students only require little assistance if any before they are ready to take the actual test. With the wide variety of classroom attendance, students come and go. I never know who may show up for class on any given day. I always know who should show up, but whether the student decides to attend or not is up to the individual. The table below (Table 2) indicates the number of attendance hours for the students in my class. This data is for the 2006-2007 academic year. Students are enrolled at various levels as indicated below, and the table indicates the amount of progress made along with the attendance hours. In adult education, students are enrolled according to their lowest test score. For example, if a student scores a 3.6 in math and a 4.2 in reading, then they are enrolled in the 2.0-3.9 level. One of the main goals in adult education is for students to make a level gain while they are pursuing their education. The ultimate goal in adult education is for students to continue to make progress until they reach the upper educational levels. Furthermore, students who are working towards achieving a GED should score at the upper levels in order to indicate GED test-readiness.

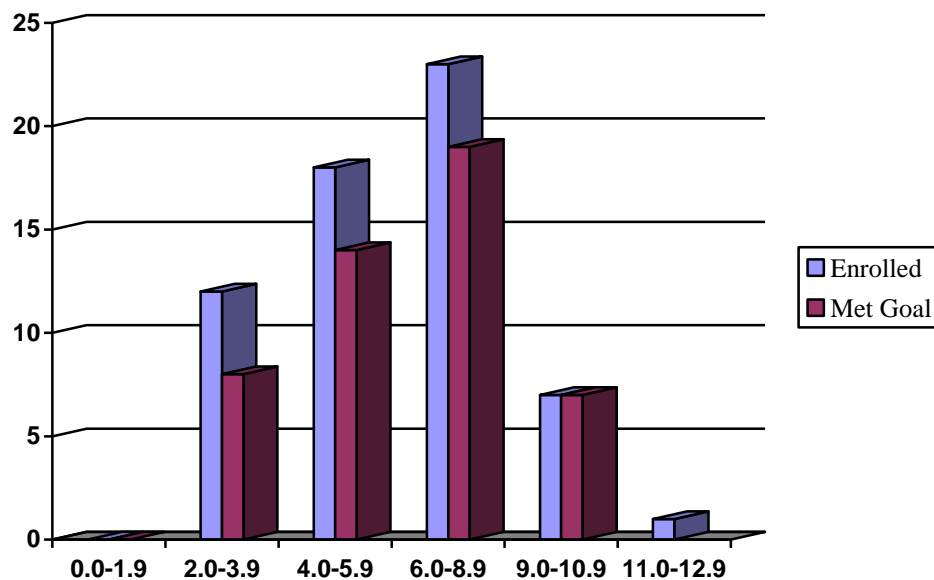
Table 2
Average Attendance Hours
2006-2007 SAMPLE

<i>Adult Education Levels</i>	<i>Students Enrolled</i>	<i>Students Met Goal</i>	<i>Average Attendance Hours Students with level gain</i>	<i>Average Attendance Hours Students without level gain</i>
Beginning Literacy – 0-1.9	0	N/A	N/A	N/A
Beginning ABE – 2.0-3.9	12	8	75	23
Low Intermediate ABE – 4.0-5.9	18	14	56	12
High Intermediate ABE – 6.0-8.9	23	19	32	37
Low Adult Secondary – 9.0-10.9	7	7	39	N/A
High Adult Secondary – 11.0-12.9	1	N/A	N/A	N/A

Table 2 clearly illustrates the importance of classroom attendance. As indicated above, students who attended more frequently made more academic progress. For example, out of the 18 students enrolled in the 4.0-5.9 level, 14 made a level gain. The average number of attendance hours for students making a level gain in that area was 56 hours compared to 12 average hours of attendance for students who did not make a level gain. In fact, in all levels except one, data indicates that students who average more classroom attendance make more progress. The one level that does not indicate more progress according to attendance is the 6.0-8.9 area. This may be due to the fact that there is a wider range in this level. For example, the 6.0-8.9 level includes three grade levels; whereas the other levels only include two grade levels. This additional level included in the High Intermediate ABE range may be a factor when considering the amount of progress students are making in relation to attendance hours. However, overall, this data reflects the positive impact of student attendance. In addition to Table 2, Chart 1 also gives an illustration of the amount of progress students in each level achieved. This table reflects the same data, only in a different format.

Chart 1

Performance Data
 2006-2007



CRUNCHING THE NUMBERS

All states, including Kentucky, are required to report data to the National Reporting System (NRS). “NRS is the accountability system for all federally funded adult education programs, mandated by the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). The NRS includes student measures to describe adult education students, program participation and assessment of the impact of adult education instruction, methodologies for collecting the measures, reporting forms and procedures, and training and technical assistance activities to assist states in collecting the measures. With the help of State directors of adult education, the project has developed indicators of performance to demonstrate State adult education agencies’ impact, and has developed a national system for collecting information on adult education student outcomes. The NRS requirements were effective beginning in July 2000.” (American Institutes for Research c/o NRS)

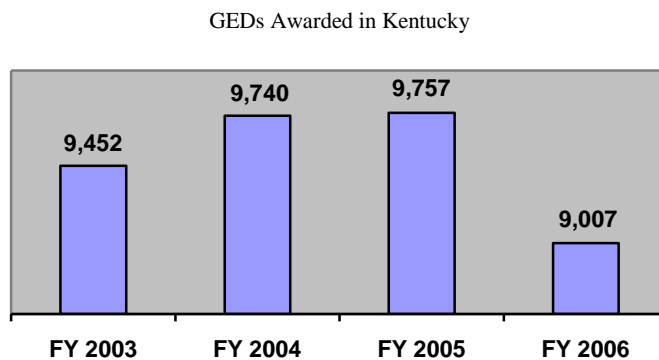
As a result of NRS requirements, performance data is very important to each instructor and adult education program. Table 3 represents the data results from fiscal year 2006-2007 for my classroom. The data illustrates that NRS goals were achieved for the year which means that we’re on the right track. Table 3 indicates that all NRS goals were met for the year. Not only were the goals met, but the expected results were exceeded in all categories. Hence, I believe that the methodology for instruction in my classroom is working.

**Table 3
Performance Data Results
2006-2007**

<i>Adult Education Levels</i>	<i>Goal</i>	<i>Enrolled</i>	<i>Met Goal</i>	<i>Results</i>
Beginning Literacy – 0-1.9	55%	0	0	N/A
Beginning ABE – 2.0-3.9	55%	12	8	67%
Low Intermediate ABE – 4.0-5.9	59%	18	14	78%
High Intermediate ABE – 6.0-8.9	56%	23	19	83%
Low Advanced ABE – 9.0-10.9	58%	7	7	100%
High Advanced ABE – 11.0-12.9	N/A	1	N/A	N/A

Other vital statistics in Kentucky tell us that “in six years, nearly 70,000 Kentuckians earned a GED, ranking Kentucky 13th highest nationally in the percentage of non-high school completers earning a GED.” Also, “in 2006, 75 percent of Kentuckians who took the GED Tests passed.” This information helps Kentucky Adult Education push forward in trying to reach more than a million Kentuckians with low literacy skills. In addition, “as part of the Council on Postsecondary Education’s 2020 goals, KYAE has set a goal of reaching 15,000 GEDs annually by 2020.” (Kentucky Adult Education Profile, 2007). Kentucky has a challenge on its hands, but I believe the state can accomplish the goals. Chart 2 illustrates the number of GEDs awarded in Kentucky each year from FY 2003 to FY 2006. That brings the total number of GEDs earned in Kentucky in the past four years to 37,956! That is a huge success for the state.

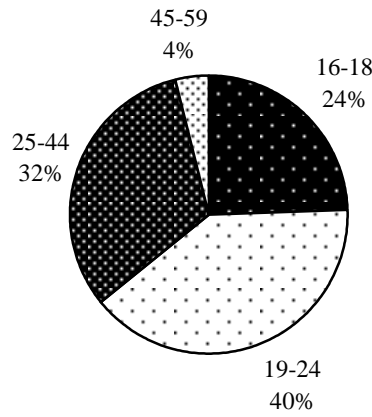
Chart 2



Statistics also show us the percentage of each age group that achieved their GED in FY 2006. According to Chart 3, the largest group of GEDs awarded went to individuals between the ages of 19 and 24. The actual percentage for that group was 40%. On the other end of the spectrum, the smallest percentage of GEDs awarded went to individuals between the ages of 45 and 59. So the results show us that education has no age limit. We are never too young or to old to achieve our dreams.

Chart 3

Kentucky GEDs Awarded by Age FY 2006



BENEFITS OF EARNING A GED

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, “the single biggest contributor to income appears to be education. On average, high-school dropouts earned \$440 per week in 2007’s second quarter. A high-school diploma meant an average weekly increase of slightly more than \$150 – a very good reason to stay in school. An associate’s degree or some college bumped the average weekly pay another hundred bucks, while a bachelor’s degree put the average weekly pay over \$1,000 per week. But without a doubt, those with advanced degrees earned more – an average of \$1,220 per week, or better than \$63,000 per year.” (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor) See Table 4 for individual income ranges according to educational attainment. “On average, individuals with a high school diploma or GED earn almost \$8,000 more a year in wages than non-graduates. (Kentucky Adult Education Profile, 2007)

**Table 4
Educational Attainment
Second Quarter 2007 Weekly Income Average**

Total – 25 years and over	\$735
Less than a high school diploma	\$440
High school graduates, no college	\$597
Some college or associate degree	\$704
Bachelor’s degree	\$1,014
Advanced degree	\$1,220

FOOD FOR THOUGHT - FAMOUS HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

Table 5 contains a partial list of famous people that dropped out of high school (Kerry). For the complete list, please visit www.education-reform.net/dropouts_text.htm. This just goes to prove that dreams can sometimes be achieved even without a high school diploma or GED; however, in recent years, it is less common for high school dropouts to succeed in many areas.

Table 5

Albert Einstein	Nobel Prize-winning physicist; "Time" magazine's "Man of the Century" (20th century) (after dropping out of high school, he studied on his own and passed the entrance exam on his second try to the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology)
John D. Rockefeller Sr.	Self-made billionaire American businessman-philanthropist; co-founder of "The Standard Oil Company"; history's first recorded billionaire (dropped out of high school two months before graduation; took business courses for ten weeks at Folsom Mercantile College [a chain business school])
Henry Ford	Self-made multimillionaire American businessman; assembly-line auto manufacturing pioneer; founder of the "Ford Motor Company"
Walt Disney	Oscar-winning American film/TV producer; animation and theme park pioneer; self-made multimillionaire founder and spokesperson of "The Walt Disney Studios/Company"; Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient; Congressional Gold Medal recipient; French Legion of Honor admittee/Medal recipient (received honorary high-school diploma from hometown high school at age 58)
Abraham Lincoln	16th President of the United States; (little formal education - Lincoln himself estimated approximately one year; home schooling/life experience; later earned a law degree through self study of books that he borrowed from friends)
George Burns	Oscar-winning actor/comedian (elementary school dropout)
Dave Thomas	Self-made multimillionaire American businessman; founder-spokesperson of the "Wendy's" fast-food restaurant chain (equivalency diploma)
"Colonel" Harlan Sanders	Self-made multimillionaire American businessman; founder-spokesperson of the "Kentucky Fried Chicken/KFC" fast-food restaurant chain (elementary school dropout; later earned a correspondence course law degree)
Herman Melville	Best-selling American author and writer of <i>Moby Dick</i> , arguably the greatest novel of all time.
Peter Jennings	Canadian-born American television journalist; evening news anchorman
Olivia Newton-John	singer-actress; British-born Australian author

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca Haley, Professor of Adult Education for Bluegrass Community & Technical College in Lexington, Kentucky, has worked in the field of adult education for the past 14 years. One of her favorite quotes is by Walt Disney – “If you can dream it, you can do it.”

NOTES