

Partnership with BC3 helps 22 to earn high school equivalency diplomas in Mercer County

July 30, 2020



Veronica Valle earned a high school equivalency diploma after enrolling in a Grove City Education Center for Adults program funded primarily through a state Department of Education grant to Butler County Community College. Valle, a former resident of West Middlesex, is shown July 23, 2020, with her three at-home sons in Hubbard, Ohio. In foreground is Daniel, 6. Standing at left is Pablo, 13, and at right, Frankie, 16.

(Grove City, PA) It sits prominently atop a wooden table between a three-seat sofa and a corner armchair, leaning back confidently within a 14-inch by 11-inch frame, acknowledged by a nearby tri-fold congratulations card and is the reason a 44-year-old mother of three at-home children has doubled her salary and quadrupled her self-esteem:

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

Department of Education

In recognition for having met the requirements of issuance of the Commonwealth Secondary School Diploma as set forth in Title 22, Section 4.72 of the Pennsylvania Code, this diploma is conferred upon

Veronica A. Valle

December 4, 2019

Signed, Mary Kay Peters, HSE Administrator

Signed, Pedro Rivera, Secretary of Education

“It stands there very tall,” Valle said, “because I am so happy that I succeeded.”

Valle and 21 other students ages 17 to 62 are standing tall after succeeding in their pursuit of a high school equivalency diploma through the Grove City Education Center for Adults, whose adult literacy program is funded primarily through a state Department of Education grant awarded to Butler County Community College.

BC3 “the glue,” director says

BC3’s adult literacy program funds free high school equivalency courses and instruction in Butler, Lawrence and Mercer counties. The program prepares students to take General Education Development examinations that measure proficiency in language arts, which includes reading and writing; and in mathematics, science and social studies.

“Even though BC3 is directly responsible for serving Butler County, it is making it possible for residents of Mercer and Lawrence counties to access these services,” said Sandy Marwick, director of the Grove City Education Center for Adults. “BC3 is, and I know this sounds cliché, the glue that holds all this together.”

Valle, a former resident of West Middlesex, left Blanche Ely High School in Pompano Beach, Fla., as a 16-year-old sophomore.

The mother of at-home children ages 16, 13 and 6 has worked at discount retail stores and at pharmacies, rarely earning more than \$6 an hour.

“It affected my self-esteem,” Valle said. “Greatly.”

About 10 percent of Mercer County residents ages 25 and older did not hold at least a high school diploma between 2014 and 2018, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

“If she can do it, I can too”

Eighty-three students who had been attending public schools in Mercer County were among the nearly 14,800 in grades 7-12 who dropped out of Pennsylvania public schools in the 2017-18 academic year, according to the most recent state Department of Education information.

Discussions with former students, relatives and others can persuade those without a high school diploma to resume their education at the Grove City Education Center for Adults, Marwick said.

For Valle, it was her friend achieving a high school equivalency diploma in 2015.

“I was thinking, ‘If she can do it, I can too,’” Valle said. “I didn’t feel comfortable just being a home mom. I wanted to be more. That’s when I was saying to myself, ‘Full speed ahead now.’”

In 2017, Valle passed General Education Development examinations in language arts and in science and in 2018, social studies.

But, Valle said, “I did not pass the math. I had to keep going with the math. Now I was just dealing with the math.”

“It was just such a relief”

The first thing new students will often say, Marwick said, is “I can’t do math.”

“Guess what? Yes, you can,” she said she tells them. “Nobody has ever left here without it. You can do it. You just don’t know math. It doesn’t mean you can’t do math.”

On Nov. 26, Valle took a practice examination in mathematics at the Grove City Education Center for Adults – and passed.

“And I flatly just started bawling,” Valle said. “I fell to the floor in class. And I was thinking, ‘Now I need to take the test, because this might not stay in my mind forever. Math is my weak subject.’”

On Dec. 4, the date in the lower left corner of the diploma that sits behind glass within a frame in her living room, Valle passed her General Education Development examination in mathematics.

“I thought, ‘OK, this took longer than what I was hoping for,’” Valle said. “But finally I got to do it. And it was just such a relief that I was able to pass. It’s an accomplishment that I thought would never happen.”

“They start seeing possibilities”

Valle is also among the nearly 4,000 students in Pennsylvania who earned a commonwealth secondary school diploma between July 1, 2019, and June 30, according to Peters, high school equivalency administrator, Bureau of Postsecondary and Adult Education with the state Department of Education.

Full-time workers age 25 and older without a high school diploma in the third quarter of 2019 had median weekly earnings that were \$143 less than those who were high school graduates but had not obtained college credits, according to the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"The amount a person earns increases significantly," said Barb Gade, grant director of BC3's adult literacy program. "Throughout their lifetime, they can earn so much more money. Just by getting their high school equivalency diploma, they start to change their viewpoint of themselves, and the family starts to change their viewpoint.

"They learn that they can do more than they thought they could. And they start seeing possibilities."

Those possibilities for the Hubbard, Ohio, resident will become a reality in one month, when Valle begins a new position in a pharmacy in New Castle, and expects to earn up to \$12 an hour – twice what she previously made.

"I don't want this program to ever end," Valle said, "because it has helped me and so many people. All the hard work pays off. All the hard work pays off."

The Grove City Education Center for Adults has been primarily funded by BC3 for the past two years as part of the three-year state Department of Education grant. Forty-two students have earned high school equivalency diplomas through the Grove City Education Center for Adults in the past two years.

The Grove City Area United Way and private gifts also help to fund the Grove City Education Center for Adults, whose next classes will begin in early August.