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WILLMAR, MINN.

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\$1.00

New GED scores could help some test-takers

Passing score drops from 150 to 145; about 280 people to pass retroactively

BY LINDA VANDERWERF
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WILLMAR — Jesus Elizondo of Willmar wants to get his high school diploma so he can train in a building trade.

And he wants to do it soon. That's why the 17-year-old is focusing on taking the four tests that will earn him General Education Development diploma.

"I can graduate faster" getting a GED, he said, and he's done well in practice tests.

Elizondo and others working to earn their GEDs have gotten a boost recently from some rule changes in the program.

Starting in January, the program dropped the passing score on its tests from 150 to 145. Minnesota made the change retroactive to Jan. 1, 2014, when the current test was put into use.

The change means about 280 people in the state who scored 145 or higher on their tests will

receive diplomas in the mail. The scoring change came about after an 18-month study of GED participants and educational outcomes, said Laura Morales, site coordinator in the Willmar Adult Basic Education program.

The new score is considered to be a good measure of high school equivalency, she said.

For people who want some help preparing for the test, the ABE program in Willmar has a daytime GED classroom at Ridgewater College. Evening classes are offered at Jefferson Learning Center in Willmar. ABE classes are free; registration is required.

So far this year, 26 people have tested at the Ridgewater testing center, Morales said.

GED candidates are tested in reasoning through language arts, mathematical reasoning, social studies and science. Each test costs \$30. A passing score is required on each test to earn a GED.

Through March 31, the state will



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Jesus Elizondo brushes up on his math skills recently in preparation for the GED tests at the Ridgewater College Library in Willmar.

LINDA VANDERWERF | TRIBUNE

provide a 50 percent discount on the cost of a GED Ready practice test. The tests are half as long

as the GED tests and mimic the actual test.

"I think they are trying to

bolster the test takers" with the discounts, Morales said. The practice tests provide an indication of whether a person is likely to pass the tests.

The number of people trying to finish their GEDs before the new test was implemented caused a spike in testing in 2013.

There was a lull after that, as people adjusted to the new tests, Morales said, and numbers have been rebounding.

The state offers some financial incentives for the GED tests, too. Students working with ABE programs receive their first test in each subject free. Some financial assistance is available for students who need to retake tests, too.

People sometimes ask her how long it will take to get a GED, she said.

"I wish there was a recipe," she said, but there's no simple answer. "It depends on how long since you

GED | A2



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Greg Schweizer, right, with the University of Minnesota Regional Sustainable Development Partnership discusses strategies for displaying and keeping fresh produce with Bergen Standahl of Bergen's Prairie Market Wednesday in Milan.

TOM CHERVENY | TRIBUNE

Grocery store thrives in tiny town

BY TOM CHERVENY
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MILAN — A small grocery store in Milan, population 369, sets this community apart from many others of its size in rural Minnesota.

And it's not because Bergen's Prairie Market offers frozen octopus, sells soy sauce in one-gallon containers, carries Scandinavian delicacies such as fishballs, or stocks its shelves with locally milled flour.

Bergen's Prairie Market provides residents in Milan with access seven days a week to a wide assortment of fresh produce and healthy food staples.

"(There's) not many stores in a town this size with a large variety of goods," said Bergen Standahl, owner of the Milan store. "We're kind of rare, is what I'm told."

He's right, which is why Stan-



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Octopus is a big seller at Bergen's Prairie Market in Milan, where owner Bergen Standahl stocks a variety of foods for his Micronesian customers.

dahl was addressing visitors in his store this week from the Southwest Regional Sustainable Development Partnership with the University of Minnesota Extension Service. The Partnership is working to help small town grocers. It wants to assure that rural residents continue to have

access to healthy foods, according to its executive director, David Fluegel.

Greater Minnesota has lost 14 percent of its small-town grocery stores during the years 2000-2013, with a 9 percent loss reported in the southwestern region of the state, according to the Center for Rural Policy Development in Mankato.

People don't always realize it, but there are a significant number of people in rural communities in the region who remain food insecure, Fluegel said. "All this rich soil where we can grow food, and yet the number of number of people" with ready access to healthy foods in rural communities is on the decline, he said.

Many small towns have become food deserts, where convenience stores with limited selections of processed foods have replaced grocery

STORE | A2

Lots of topics, little time for Legislature

BY DON DAVIS
Forum News Service

ST. PAUL — Transportation. Taxes. Public works projects. Education. Water quality.

That is merely the beginning of the list of topics Minnesota lawmakers want to consider when they return to session Tuesday. It is not a much different list than other years, but the time to accomplish anything is limited, mostly because of a \$304 million Capitol renovation that has closed everything but the House chamber, one elevator and hallways allowing people to get to the chamber.

Senators are meeting in a

committee room converted into a temporary chamber.

Is the session too short to get much done? Senate Majority Leader Tom Bakk, D-Cook, said it will be tough to accomplish some things, but House Minority Leader Paul Thissen looked at it a different way:

"Just remember when we talk about 10 weeks, the whole budget of, you know, however many billion dollars it is, was basically negotiated in all its details in about 10 days at the end of last session. So 10 weeks seems like a lot of time to get a lot of work done to me."

Many of the state's 201

LEGISLATURE | A2



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RAND MIDDLETON | TRIBUNE

Warmer weather

A fine Sunday for a pick-up game at the fields on Robbins Island. The 60-degree day also encouraged walkers, bikers and disc golfers. The temperature reached the low 60s in west-central Minnesota. The five-day forecast calls for more of the same with the mercury climbing to 67 degrees in the Willmar area Friday.

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