

Requiring Competencies for Graduation —Some Curricular Issues

Gordon Cawelti

As more and more states legislate competencies as the price of graduation, the curricular implications of such a move must be examined. Several such issues are defined here.

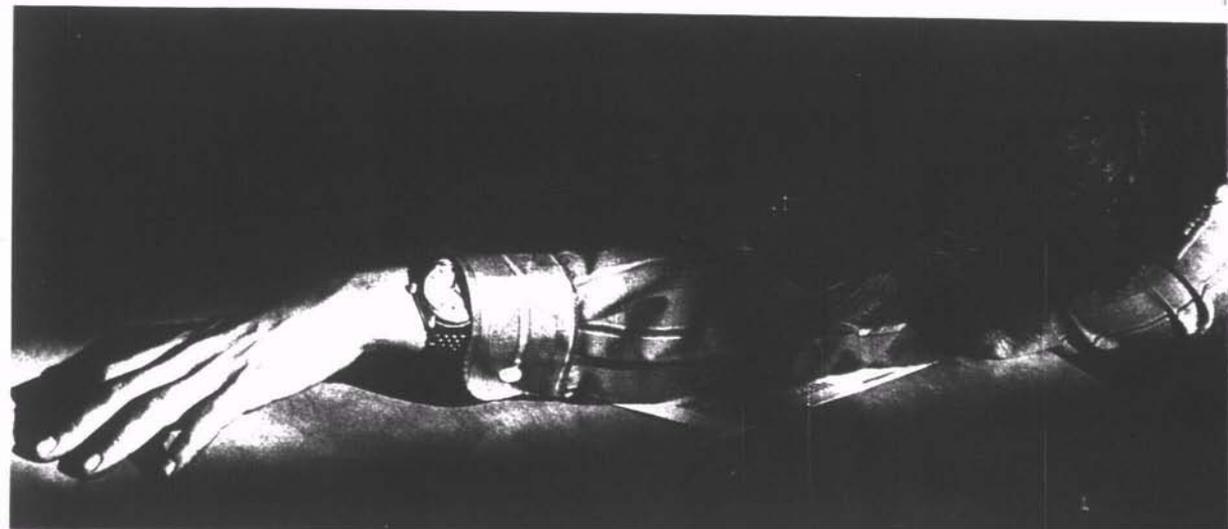
During the past several months, actions have been taken by legislators, state boards of education, state departments of education, and local school boards which mandate that certain minimum competencies be required before students are either passed on to the next grade or graduated from high school. One also frequently hears these days such terms as "coping skills," "adult literacy," and "survival skills," and these terms relate to the same movement. A major study at the University of Texas showed that one out of five adults tested did not possess the minimum skills needed to cope with the requirements as a citizen in contemporary society.

As a response to this kind of finding, and an increasing confusion and impatience on the part of the American public, politicians and school board members are reviving policies that require that prespecified competencies be demonstrated before promotion or graduation occurs. This obviously is an outgrowth of the stress resulting from the "back to basics" movement. Although some may regard this as an oversimplification of the problem, the public quite clearly is saying that it wants more and better teaching of the basic skills of reading, mathematics, and writing. A recent Gallup poll indicates that by a two to one majority Americans believe the quality of education is declining. Let's examine some of the plausible reasons for this movement which is now rampant across the country.

We now have the most ambitious educational undertaking ever conceived by a society. We now have roughly 90 percent of the age group in high schools (with 76 percent graduating), and the conventional wisdom has always been that this is the pathway to success in America. When I graduated from high school in 1947, we probably had closer to 60 percent of the age group in high school with a large number leaving after the eighth grade (presumably many of the less academically able group) and going to work on the farm or elsewhere.

Another reason many adolescents are poorly motivated to do well in school is that the very nature of society has produced a large segment of

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"One reason that many adolescents are poorly motivated to do well in school is that the very nature of society has produced a large segment of youths who are severely alienated." Photo: Michael J. Sexton.

youths who are severely alienated. As an example, between 1950 and 1974 the annual suicide rate for white teenaged males went from 3.7 per 100,000 members of the cohort to 11.9 per 100,000. During the same period of time, the suicide rate for adults remained fairly constant at something on the order of 10 or 11. The data on drug usage, another symptom of alienation, reveals that 42 percent of the seniors had used marijuana 10 or more times in the past year (in 1976) compared to 26 percent in 1968. Between 1957 and 1972, the rate of delinquency cases disposed of in the juvenile courts rose from 19.1 to 33.6 per 1,000 child population aged 10 to 17. Teacher assaults have risen dramatically during a similar period of time. The rate of illegitimate births for unmarried white females went from 5.1 per 1,000 in 1950 to 11.1 per 1,000 in 1975.¹ It seems unlikely that arbitrary requirements of the sort we are seeing among the states will do little more than push the severely alienated youth out of school faster.

In addition to youth alienation and the high percentage of the age group remaining in school, another likely explanation for the problem of low achievement in high schools is that today there is an increasing concern about the labor market and the likelihood of success if a high school diploma is attained. Young people cannot be fooled when

they see persons with MA degrees driving taxis. Thus, the incentive that once existed is much less clear today even though many youngsters still go through the motions of getting high marks with the hope that it will provide a payoff for them. They are also aware that whereas once it was not possible to get into college with low marks or poor reading, they can get in *somewhere* today if they choose to.

Finally, widespread television viewing has helped produce what is essentially a nonreading age group. The visual impact of television is very easy to consume, and to compare learning about osmosis with watching *Kojak*, it must be obvious that the latter is a more forceful and enticing activity. Recent studies show that 17-year-olds are likely to have seen some 15,000 or more hours of television by that age in their young life.² In any event, this technological phenomenon has probably greatly reduced the ability of many

¹ For detailed data on the youth alienation phenomenon, see: Edward Wynne. "Adolescent Alienation and Youth Policy." *Teachers College Record* 78:23-40; September 1976.

² For a useful summary of research on television viewing habits of children and discussion of its addictive aspects, see: Marie Winn. *The Plug-In Drug*. New York: Viking Press. 231 pp.



"Widespread television viewing has helped produce what is essentially a nonreading age group." Photo: Joe Di Dio, NEA.

students to perform well on standardized examinations, which are the basis for determining promotion or graduation.

Thus, many laypersons seem to be saying "let them make it or else" or a sort of "take it or leave it" attitude insofar as public schooling is concerned. If you accept my analysis of probable reasons for the coming of competency based education, it seems clear that students from low income homes, alienated youths, and those with a cultural difference are most likely to be caught in the competency game. Although data are not yet available on just how many youngsters have been denied graduation because such policies or legislation have project implementation dates, this clearly is the future implication of the movement.

Status of the Competency Based Education Movement

Although it is difficult to keep pace with developments, a study by the Education Commission of the States³ revealed that at the close of 1976, seven states had enacted legislation in this area and another nine had taken state board action or state department of education action to mandate some form of minimal competency activity. Thus, while in the past few decades the trend has been more and more toward simply earning credits and attending as a basis for graduation, the

³ Chris Pipher. "Update III: Minimal Competency." Denver: Education Commission of the States, January 1977. 40 pp. mimeographed.

third requirement of competencies is rapidly being added. The original state level action was taken in Oregon, and this seems to be one of the more soundly conceived plans in that it allows much latitude for local determination of these competencies within certain prescribed areas. Oregon has essentially determined what it calls adult "survival skills" whereas other states such as Arizona, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Louisiana, Maryland, Nebraska, and Tennessee are concerned with a very limited number of basic skills.

A related movement is what is referred to as "early out" testing, and this plan has been promulgated in California. However, it appears that a very limited number of students are electing to actually leave high school even if they perform satisfactorily on the examination. This is a paper and pencil, group administered examination. The Los Angeles Unified School District has developed a reading proficiency test called the Senior High Assessment of Reading Performance (SHARP). If students cannot pass these examinations, which require them to deal with forms and documents and which they will be required to complete when they leave school, they are given further training in reading before they are permitted to graduate.

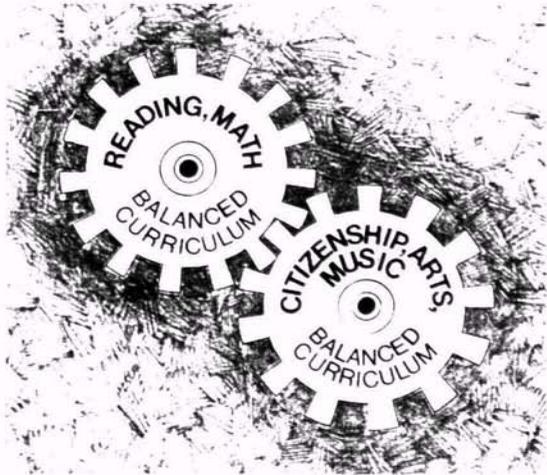
A similar plan has been underway for almost 20 years among the Denver high schools. This test contains 120 questions dealing with everyday life such as understanding rent receipts, membership applications, voter registration forms, unemployment insurance forms, and job applications. My information has it that only about 3 percent of the seniors have been denied graduation over the years.

At least one district in Florida is using the Adult Performance Level (APL) program, which is now being marketed by the American College Testing Group in Iowa City and is an outgrowth of the functional literacy project at the University of Texas previously mentioned. The content areas in this test are community resources, occupational knowledge, consumer economics, health, and government and law. These content areas are fitted into a grid that has five skill areas such as reading, writing, computation, problem solving, and identification of facts and terms.

As an example, for one exercise under government and within the writing skill area, a

student would write a satisfactory letter to a legislator. Under reading, he would be required to read and interpret a ballot. Under reading in the occupational knowledge area, he would be required to show an understanding from having read a want ad under the job section.

It seems to me that there is a very real likelihood of further trivializing secondary education with a curriculum that is already regarded as largely irrelevant by many students. This is less true in the basic skill areas than in some of the other areas such as government and law as required in the APL program. Isn't it much more significant that students have understood Senator McGovern's reasons for opposing the Vietnam war than for South Dakota students to know that he is their senator?



Curriculum Issues Relating to the CBE Issue

1. *Instructional requirements for new goals.* It should be of little surprise that 15 or 20 percent of the students in a typical high school might fail a proficiency test if the competencies elicited are not a part of the curriculum. Analysis of the state legislation has shown that only in two or three instances has any provision at all been made for the new *instructional requirements* required for new goals.

2. *Proliferation of testing.* This movement is adding yet another standardized examination of the high school student on top of a standard (usually norm-referenced) test, the CEEB achieve-

ment test or the SAT examination plus a particular academic aptitude test that may be required by other institutions of higher education. Incidentally, application of the APL test in one Florida district revealed that 8 percent of the Anglo students failed the test while 56 percent of the minority failed it.

3. *The problem of minimum vs. maximum standards.* This kind of legislation may lull average students into a kind of complacency since nowhere have I seen any attention to multiple levels of standards that would be needed if the concept were to raise standards of performance among all students. Again, only 15 or 20 percent of the seniors could be expected to fail in a normal distribution of abilities, although this would be higher certainly in most low income schools.

4. *The issue of capability vs. competency—kinds of proficiencies.* The concept of capabilities refers to standard school subjects such as reading and arithmetic and the math problem or reading skills normally associated with these.⁴ Competencies, on the other hand, tend to refer to the application of capabilities to adult life situations.

5. *The likelihood of further curriculum imbalance.* Most states or boards that have acted in this area have indeed focused on reading, mathematics, and perhaps writing skills. The evidence indicates that the tendency has been very strong to reduce or eliminate programs in other areas such as the arts, or health and physical education. As I have previously argued in my book, *Vitalizing the High School*,⁵ there is a serious need now to define what general education for all American students should be, but the CBE movement is not facing up to this issue.

6. *Research evidence on the effects of grade retention.* States or school districts adopting the competency based education concept are clearly moving away from social promotion. The evidence indicates that grade retention in recent years has been very low; in most rural states the rate is usually under 1 percent whereas such retention is substantially higher in such southern states as Louisiana and Mississippi plus the District of Columbia where retention rates within the last 5 years stood at 8 or 9 percent. It should be noted that in each instance the rate of retention for minority students is typically two or three times higher than for nonminority students.

The Jackson report reviewed some 44 studies and concluded "there is no reliable body of evidence to indicate that grade retention is more beneficial than grade promotion for students with serious academic or adjustment difficulties. . . ."⁶ Thus, those educators who retain pupils in a grade do so without valid research evidence to indicate that such treatment will provide greater benefits to students with academic or adjustment difficulties than will promotion to the next grade. Thus, although the assumption is that retention will increase motivation for academic work, this does not bear up under close scrutiny. A recent synthesis of the research reported in *Educational Leadership* came to a similar conclusion. In this study, Bocks concluded: "These studies which have examined the social outcomes of nonpromotion point to many harmful consequences. Thus nonpromotion for the reason of social immaturity does not receive support from these research findings."⁷ In one of the studies cited, a definite degree of nonacceptance for overage children was found.

The studies of nonpromotion show that it does not have a positive effect on achievement and it often has harmful consequences from the social standpoint. Goodlad and others have concluded that nonpromotion does not appear to reduce the range of abilities with which the upper grade teachers have to cope.

Potential Benefits of the CBE Movement

It seems to me that there are two potential benefits that can be derived from establishing competencies as a basis for promotion or graduation. (It should be noted that in at least two states the CBE movement has been extended into the elementary grades, and it is likely that more will attempt this.)

⁴ For a more complete discussion of the capacity vs. competency issue, see: William G. Spady and Douglas E. Mitchell. "Competency Based Education: Organizational Issues and Implications." *Educational Researcher* 6:9-15; February 1977.

⁵ Gordon Cawelti. *Vitalizing the High School: A Curriculum Critique of Major Reform Proposals*. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1974. 52 pp.

⁶ Gregg B. Jackson. "The Research Evidence on the Effects of Grade Retention." *Review of Educational Research* 45(4):627; Fall 1975.

⁷ William M. Bocks. "Non-Promotion: 'A Year To Grow?'" *Educational Leadership* 34(5):381; February 1977.

One of these benefits is that it does appear to be useful to focus the resources of a school district on a clear set of goals. That is to say, behavioral objectives in and of themselves are of limited value in attempting to overcome the learning deficiency of a youngster. Similarly, a physician will do no better at treating a cancer that he does not know how to treat successfully, even if he articulates the condition in a highly objective language. But because of the high mobility rate, particularly in the urban setting, it is necessary to have as clear an understanding as possible among the several teachers in the system as to the precise skills that should be taught at the various levels. A recent 3½ million dollar study by the Educational Testing Service has indicated that among the five most successful programs they were able to locate in an empirical study, one of the conditions that was always present in the schools with the most successful programs was the fact that the faculty, administration, and board had clearly indicated basic skills as a high priority instructional goal, and they had allocated resources accordingly. Bloom⁸ and others have concluded that improving achievement levels among slow learners does much to improve their self concept.

A second potential benefit from the CBE movement is that it may afford us for the first time in many years an opportunity to fundamentally reexamine the nature of general education for secondary students. The present instructional program represents more what I called a "patchwork curriculum" among traditional separate subjects. While we have been through a curriculum reform era in the fifties, an innovation era in the sixties, and now find ourselves in an accountability era, at no time during these movements have I seen a substantial effort to define the nature of general education—that education which is "basic" and that all youngsters should receive.

I have proposed that this general education should come among these five areas or clusters as I have described them: (a) learning skills; (b) health, physical education, and leisure; (c) career education; (d) cultural studies; and (e) societal studies. I believe that if we were willing to look seriously at the competencies that are required for a successful adult to function and be fulfilled in an advanced technological society, it would be

worth the effort to get seriously into the CBE movement.

I think we must remember that education should be a liberating experience for all—helping them to achieve their fullest potential and to relate in a humane way to all persons with whom they have contact. This clearly will not be a product of the CBE movement as it is now mandated in so many states. To attempt to predict fully what all young people ought to be by the time they leave school is futile. I can get little enthusiasm for the narrowly defined description of what constitutes general education for secondary school age youngsters as I have examined the curriculum provisions of the CBE movement at the precollegiate level.

I hope that all persons who would be instructional leaders will argue as persuasively as possible for the development of a balanced program of general education that envisions education as liberating and not restricting. Any attempt to return to an elitist form of education that cuts off low income, culturally disadvantaged or alienated youths from the mainstream is counter to our democratic ideals. I do feel that alternative settings for such cohorts may be the only immediate answer to provide appropriate instruction, but this is better than to simply give them a certificate of attendance and cast them into the streets. Young people most assuredly are headed for welfare and failure in adult life if we dare to oversimplify such an important question. *ET*

⁸ Benjamin Bloom. *Human Characteristics and School Learning*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1976. 284 pp.



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