

A Board Member Looks At Requiring Competencies for Graduation

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A major urban school system describes why-and-how it is developing a program for competency tests as a graduation requirement. Students who fail the competency tests in reading and math will receive a copy of their high school record, but not a diploma until they have passed these tests.

Competency tests have now emerged as a strong focal point of the "back-to-the-basics" movement to determine whether students gain minimum skills in our schools. Declining test scores, a scarcity of money, and the product orientation of business have had their impact on judging schools' effectiveness.

Granted, there are some hidden agendas among some supporters of the "back-to-the-

basics-competency test" movement. No doubt, it can be a new way to separate the cream, to penalize black students or at least to resegment classrooms, and to eliminate "frills."

This bothers me. But if I am honest, I have to admit that too many students are *not* well-grounded in basic skills.

Citizens want to know what is being taught, how it is being taught, and what will be done to correct deficiencies. They need some answers. The question is: Will competency testing for graduation help the School Board, administrators, teachers, and students be more accountable, or will it merely create more bureaucratic ways to penalize students and to frustrate teachers?

At present more than 33 states have passed competency test legislation. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System is now developing a program for competency tests as a graduation requirement.

Like all tests, competency tests for gradua-



tion can be a two-edged sword. It is therefore incumbent on educators and boards of education to make sure that political currents are weighed and measured by their impact on children.

I believe that if competency testing can be a catalyst for examining "Where are we going in our schools?" and "Why?" it can have a positive impact on public education. The basic goal of education is to help all students to assume responsibility for their own behavior and learning. In order to do this, we must be sure that they have the necessary tools of learning and an incentive to use them. Competency tests can aid us in this task if we use them wisely.

As a school board member, I have tried to examine competency tests in light of what I believe about children and learning and relative to what I see happening in our schools. I believe a good self-concept is important to learning, but I see that not being able to read has a definite effect on a child's self-concept. Most of the "dis-

cipline problems" in junior high are poor readers. We need to look at the total K-12 curriculum, particularly in reading and math. The Stanford Achievement Test scores for our ninth grade in 1976 showed that although 18 percent of the students were reading above twelfth-grade level, 13 percent were reading below fourth-grade level. Why are so many children having trouble?

I believe that education is not something you "do" to someone, but I question whether or not we are really involving students so that they know specifically what is expected of them and have a personal stake in the results. I believe that we should not discriminate against the poor minority child; and I see evidence that low expectations or no expectations are the worst kind of discrimination.

High schools today are for all youngsters, not just those who are going to college. Do our curriculum, counseling, and scheduling really reflect this belief? Are we providing reading instruction in a systematic way beyond the third grade? Are counselors identifying youngsters with special needs and plugging them into existing programs? Is there any relationship between the requirements in the tenth grade and the dropout rate?

Too many students fall in the cracks and are passed along until they drop out or graduate. Does the high school diploma today only mean a student has attended school for 12 years and has taken a certain number of required and elective courses?

The question about the validity of the high school diploma prompted some high school administrators in our system to conduct an extensive study of the national trend toward competency testing and to recommend to the Board of



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Education a competency test in reading and math as a graduation requirement for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

Beginning in August 1975, a committee composed of four high school principals, two assistant principals, and an area superintendent who was formerly a high school principal, began studying graduation requirements in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System as their project in a six-year administrative program through the University of North Carolina. Concerned with giving the high school diploma more validity both for students and future employers, they engaged in extensive research, visited a number of school districts, and surveyed many different groups. They involved hundreds of other educators, parents, and community groups in their study.

They proposed (a) that minimal survival skill tests in reading and math be given to all tenth graders in October and repeated every semester until passed; (b) that all diplomas awarded by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools be under the same competency requirements; and (c) that students who fail to pass the competency tests in both areas, but who have met the other requirements for graduation (regular attendance and 13 units on the high school level) be given a copy of their high school record in lieu of their diploma at graduation and be allowed to continue taking the tests after leaving school. They also recommended that remedial programs be developed for students not passing the test.

It was their stated belief that the competency test recommendations would accomplish the following purposes for our school system:

1. Give greater *validity* to the high school diploma;
2. *Diagnose* at an early time in high school

areas where students have reading and computation difficulties;

3. Encourage high schools to provide *remedial* learning opportunities for students not meeting the competency requirements; and

4. Help administrators, teachers, and especially students be more *accountable*.

Important questions have been raised about the effects of these tests. Some educators have expressed fear that survival level testing will narrow our focus only to those things that are easily measured by tests and will ignore the broader aspects of concept and attitude. Other educators stated that decision-making and problem-solving skills might be as important as reading and math for survival in today's world. The real question may be, "How are these skills being taught?" Educators also expressed the concern that competency testing might reduce the high school curriculum to superficial matters precluding the depth of subjects.

To limit the study of language and mathematics to a few defined tasks is as erroneous as not admitting that those students who do not get the basic skills can ever explore the depth of these and related disciplines. (Recent studies show that one reason there are few women in engineering, chemistry, and physics is because they did not get the prerequisite math courses in high school.)

Some teachers surveyed expressed the concern that they were not trained to teach basic subjects. Competency testing might well have an effect on that last bastion of subject-oriented, depersonalized education — the senior high school. Competency tests might well lead senior high teachers into examining defined objectives and prescriptive teaching based on individual needs.

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This will require a commitment to staff-development on the part of the system.

Others fear that by focusing on reading and math specifically, the curriculum will be further fragmented. If every teacher has a commitment to these basic objectives, the interrelationship of reading and math with other subject areas can be developed. This will take more staff development as well as a change in curriculum design. In our system, some junior and senior high school teachers are exploring "reading in the content area." This is a good beginning.

Accepting the premise that reading and math skills are basic to survival and important to further learning doesn't prevent learning from taking place through other means. For some students, it will take years of persistent effort to master survival level skills required in the reading and math tests. But they also can be learning other things in other ways. As important as reading is, it is not the only route to learning. For the child whose reading skill is not sufficient to read textbooks, the tape recorder and other audiovisual tools may be used. Are we penalizing a child further by the way we teach?

Although the community response to the committee's recommendations was generally positive, there were two notable exceptions. One, a black man who is a graduate of our formerly segregated school system, questioned how we proposed to use the competency tests as a diagnostic tool when not all students who have now been diagnosed as needing help are as yet getting it. He questioned whether the School Board was willing to back up this proposal with personnel and money.

In order to do this, the Board will have to

interpret to the community and to the County Commission, which controls school funds, how important remediation is. Even in redeploying personnel and materiel, care must be taken not to eliminate those courses such as music and art that mean so much to so many students.

The Community Relations Committee addressed itself to similar concerns citing that "one of the most difficult problems we have in our community is a high unemployment rate among the very group that will have difficulty passing the competency tests." The committee questioned the adequacy and quality of the present remedial program. The committee members felt the program should be upgraded before a policy is established to withhold diplomas. They also pointed out that the tenth grade might be too late for identification and remediation.

It was interesting that the committee that made the Graduation Test Requirement recommendation felt strongly about the validity of the diagnostic function of the tests, and therefore recommended that testing begin in the tenth grade. The committee did not recommend junior high testing because this was out of its sphere of control. Remediation must be part of the total school program and not limited to the tenth grade or senior high.

Recently our school system adopted some practices that should prove helpful. A goals study was made jointly by the Board of Education and the superintendency. From these goals grew a recommendation that each elementary school be required to select a reading management system. These along with a math skills checklist were started in all elementary schools this fall. These management systems list the sequence and scope of reading and math; allow each student to pro-



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gress from one skill to another with careful pre- and posttesting; and provide a way of grouping for instruction rather than by ability, a system for organizing supplementary materials, and a record for the next teacher. The Title I math and reading labs that we have in some schools will also be coordinated by the classroom teacher under these management systems so that the classroom teacher will remain responsible for the student wherever he or she is. Therefore, a continuous progress program for students can develop. With this practice, fewer students should reach the tenth grade unable to pass the competency tests.

Junior high teachers are feeling caught between the elementary reading and math management systems and the competency test for tenth graders. Hopefully, the present junior high study will help to utilize these data in planning a better program for the junior high students so that they can continue the progress made earlier.

The administration's recommendations for competency test preparation and deficiency corrections specifically state that all math teachers in junior high will go over the test objectives each year and that all language arts teachers should give students experiences in reading comprehension, reading the newspaper, filling out forms, and following written directions. Remedial programs are also outlined for the senior high schools.

Last spring a sample competency test in reading and math was field tested among a sampling of ninth, tenth, and eleventh graders. The purpose was actually to test the efficiency of the various items on the tests rather than to test the students. Ambiguous or trick questions were eliminated as well as those that were biased against boys, girls, blacks, or whites. As a sur-

vival level skill test, the competency test must differ from regular achievement or grade level tests in content and scoring. It is more of a criterion-referenced test based on our particular curriculum (or whatever we decide will be our curriculum for survival level.) Hopefully the time will come when all of our students can pass it. Serious questions remain about the effect on EMR and LD students.

In giving their reactions to the tests students made these comments:

"It (math) tells you what you know, what you forgot, and what you need to go over."

"It (reading) tested basic problems. I think the test was mainly to see how a student would do in the outside world."

"The math was harder than the reading."

School Board members took the math test, missing from 1-8 out of 60 items. They had varied responses also. Several mentioned that an ambiguous question had tripped them up. Some felt that there were too many fractions, especially since we are going to decimals with metrics. (This illustrated how realistic expectations may change with time.) A few felt the math items did not address real life problems as well as they had expected. Others expressed that that "old bad test-taking feeling" had come back.

Last March, the School Board adopted the following recommendations of the Superintendent concerning the Competency Exam as a graduation requirement:

1. That the competency testing program be developed in math and reading skills
2. That field testing be conducted in the spring

3. That a planned individualized program be developed for those students who are unable to pass the examination

4. That extensive work in skill areas be built into the junior high curriculum

5. That a reading management system be fully utilized to monitor the skill development of each student

6. That the Board seek to have the Charlotte-Mecklenburg plan considered in the development of the statewide plan and seek to have local representatives appointed to the Competency Test Commission (state level)

7. That the relationship of the competency examination to the high school diploma not be determined until the field testing data are available and the state Competency Test Commission has made its recommendations.

When a school board passes a new policy or a state legislature passes a new law, educators may react defensively because it brings change or passively tack it on unexamined to an already bulging program.

We in Charlotte-Mecklenburg feel fortunate that some of our own high school people had the foresight to deal in advance with a national trend and its relationship to our school system. Their study is being used by the Testing Commission of North Carolina in developing a program for implementing the North Carolina test legislation.

Now it is time for our total system to look closely at what we are doing, and why we are doing it. Competency tests can be the catalyst for this process.

We have the opportunity to clarify what we are about: to reinforce the integrity of public education; to determine realistic expectations;

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and to define specifically agreed upon educational goals and educational and community resources.

This is an exciting process. It can afford us an opportunity for *unity of effort* as opposed to polarization. (This is based on the assumption that polarization between the back-to-basics proponents and the humanist whole-child proponents exists in other places besides Charlotte-Mecklenburg.) The competency tests for graduation can help us to be more accountable or merely create more bureaucratic ways to fail students and frustrate teachers. The choice is ours. [27]



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