
School people and legislators alike have become concerned with defining and testing for minimal competencies. They are learning, however, that the pertinent questions in this regard are more complex and more elusive than they had first thought possible.

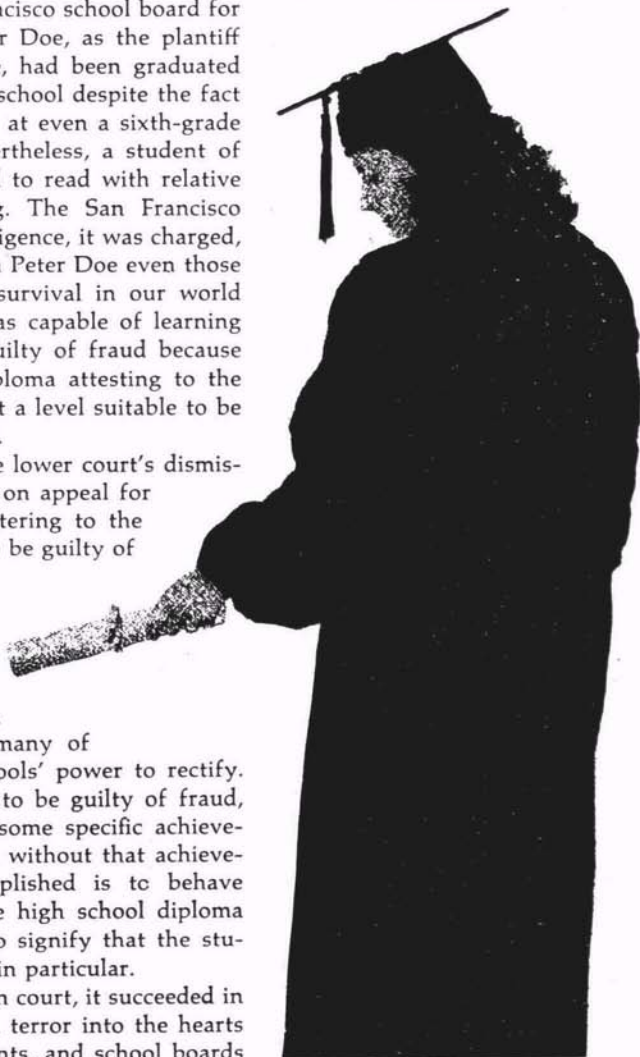
What Is a "Competent" High School Graduate?

Kenneth A. Strike

In 1973, a case was introduced in The San Francisco Superior Court by a recent high school graduate suing the San Francisco school board for negligence and fraud. Peter Doe, as the plaintiff was designated in the case, had been graduated from a San Francisco high school despite the fact that he was unable to read at even a sixth-grade level. Peter Doe was, nevertheless, a student of normal ability who learned to read with relative ease with private tutoring. The San Francisco schools were guilty of negligence, it was charged, because they failed to teach Peter Doe even those basic skills necessary for survival in our world despite the fact that he was capable of learning them. The schools were guilty of fraud because they gave Peter Doe a diploma attesting to the fact that he had achieved at a level suitable to be graduated from high school.

Several years later, the lower court's dismissal of the case was upheld on appeal for reasons not altogether flattering to the schools. For the schools to be guilty of negligence, it seems that it had to be within the school's power to prevent the harm. But, the court reasoned, students may fail to learn for all sorts of reasons, many of which are beyond the schools' power to rectify. Moreover, for the schools to be guilty of fraud, the diploma must signify some specific achievement such that to award it without that achievement having been accomplished is to behave fraudulently. However, the high school diploma actually does not appear to signify that the student has learned anything in particular.

While the case failed in court, it succeeded in the public forum. It struck terror into the hearts of principals, superintendents, and school boards



throughout the country. How many schools after all do not have several Peter Does among their graduates? And it pointed out for all to see that a high school diploma was not a guarantee that its possessor had learned anything in high school. Indeed, it appears that for many students the diploma signifies little more than twelve years of reasonably faithful and nonbelligerent attendance.

As a result of such incidents, educators and legislators have become interested in defining and testing for minimal competencies for high school graduation. But this interest has opened up a Pandora's Box of issues about what we expect of our high schools. What do we expect students to learn? What are we prepared to insist that they learn at the bare minimum?



The Answer Is Less Than Obvious

Not only is the answer to these questions less than obvious, it is not even clear how to think about the questions. What approach shall we take? One could treat this question as a philosophical problem. We might ask what is meant by education or by an educated person? But such an approach is not suited to identifying minimal competencies. It is aimed at the ideal, not the minimum. We might instead try to generate some way to reflect student, parental, or community ideas in establishing such minimal competence. But what students need and what they or their

parents want is not always the same. Moreover, while these days one might get ready agreement from parents that students should be minimally competent, it would be surprising if agreement were to be forthcoming concerning what those minimal competencies ought to be.

Thus, before we can get down to the work of spelling out minimal competencies, we need an approach. We need some idea of the right kinds of questions to raise. I want to suggest the following. I propose that the problem of identifying minimal competencies be addressed by asking "*What kinds of knowledge and skills are of such import that the state has a right to apply coercion in order to get someone to acquire them?*" The answer to this question, I suggest, will tell us what should count as a minimal competency.

Why ask this question? There are two reasons. First, making graduation contingent on passing a minimal competence test is in fact coercive. Second, asking this question allows us to look at the notion of minimal competencies in the context of some political and legal concepts concerning the state's fundamental interests in education.

We need to keep in mind that a high school diploma is no longer a privilege or luxury. It has become an economic necessity. Withdrawal of this necessity has the consequence of making access to the job market substantially more difficult and of confining the noncredentialed person to the fringe of economic viability. Thus, to say to a student "You may not graduate until you have learned thus-and-so" attaches a substantial state-imposed sanction to the failure to learn thus-and-so.

What Justifies Coercion?

Well then, how does our society justify coercion, particularly how does it justify it concerning education? Democratic societies characteristically approach the justification of coercion with a distinction between public and private acts. Those acts—so the argument goes—that do not have substantial consequences for the well-being of others ought to be beyond the arm of the state. Private action should not be the object of coercion. But, when the individual acts in a way that his or her actions can result in harm to others, the state may legitimately regulate one's behavior.

In order to apply this view to education, we have to ask whether there are knowledge or skills

of a nature that success or failure in their acquisition is a public rather than a private matter. On this view, it is objectionable to compel a student to learn *Hamlet* or to learn to change a tire since failure to learn these things harms no one but the student. But, there may be other kinds of knowledge or skill that are public in that whether or not a person acquires them has consequences for the well-being of society. On this line of analysis, then, the identification of minimal competencies becomes the problem of identifying those forms of personal incompetence that have broad enough social effects that the state has a legitimate interest in using coercion to defend against them.

Having transformed the question, we need to see whether it can be answered in its new form. It may be helpful here to look at a recent Supreme Court case in which a similar issue was addressed, *Wisconsin vs. Yoder* 406 US 205 (1972). The case concerns a group of Amish who wished, because of their religious convictions, to have their children exempted from attendance at public schools after the eighth grade. Because the first amendment right to free exercise of religion was involved, the Court reasoned that Wisconsin must demonstrate some substantial state interest in order to justify compelling Amish parents to send their children to high school. Justice Burger reports that Wisconsin advanced two arguments.

It notes, as Thomas Jefferson pointed out early in our history, that some degree of education is necessary to prepare citizens to participate effectively and intelligently in our open political system if we are to preserve freedom and independence. Further, education prepares individuals to be self-reliant and self-sufficient participants in society.

Burger states the Court's view of these claims simply: "We accept these propositions." But he went on to hold that neither argument could be used to justify enforcing compulsory attendance laws against the Amish who, it appears, become good and self-reliant citizens without the aid of public schools.

The Amish notwithstanding, the Court has identified two areas of educational relevance where coercion is permissible. The state it seems may use coercion to protect society from the political and economic incompetence of its citizens. If we take this as a clue to minimal competencies,

we will want to ask two basic questions: (a) What does a person need to know or need to be able to do in order to participate at a minimum level in the democratic process? and (b) What does a person need to know or be able to do to be able to be self-supporting?

A Focus on Skills

These two questions may suggest that we should focus primarily on basic skills, especially literacy. Jefferson's suggestion that everyone should be able to read a newspaper may be a reasonable operational definition of the notion of minimal competence for political participation. Newspapers are a basic source of political information. Similarly the ability to read the help wanted column or to fill out a job application may be treated as minimal conditions for economic viability. The newspaper particularly commends itself as a standard reference point for minimal competency in processing written information



since the newspaper is a fundamental source of both political and economic information in our society, and since the desire to maintain circulation will prevent the paper from making excessive or gratuitous demands on the literacy ability of the citizens.

Before we opt for a basic skills approach to minimal competencies, however, let's look at some problems and objections. First, it is not implausible to argue that necessary economic and political information can be made available at a minimal level in nonwritten form. Political information is readily available through television or radio. Much of the information utilized in routine daily

activities can be put in pictorial form as has been done with many traffic signs. Further, it is not difficult to imagine ways that the process of identifying and applying for a job could be made less dependent on reading and writing. Moreover, there are many jobs that can be executed by someone who cannot read or write. Given the need, more could be so designed. It is not clear that basic literacy has to be a part of minimum social competence. There are non-educational policy alternatives to assisting persons with poor basic skills. Pursuing these may be an alternative means to the goals of minimal competency exams.

It is also possible that there are other kinds of knowledge and skills that are more important than such "basic" skills. I have recently seen an article that claimed that nearly 50 percent of the children born in Washington, D.C., last year were illegitimate. It is quite predictable that a high percentage of the mothers of these children are now on some form of public assistance. The illustration suggests that we need to ask how often it is not the inability to read, but an early mistake that causes young adults to fail to achieve economic self-sufficiency. Certainly teenage pregnancies or early brushes with the law contribute substantially to young people failing to be economically viable.

Does it follow that the competencies acquired in a sex education or even moral education class should be included in our list of minimal competencies? Such a view suggests that pregnancy or delinquency is a function of lack of morals or lack of information. But many experts suggest that teenage pregnancy or delinquency results from causes such as the desire to have a loving relationship with a dependent infant, the acceptance of a romanticized view of motherhood, the inability to resist peer pressure, or the internalization of an antisocial model of manliness.

Consider how important it is for teenagers to be able to resist images and to be capable of independent judgment. Competent political judgment requires the ability to get beyond the images projected by political advertising to a rational evaluation of issues and one's interests. The avoidance of an economically crippling early mistake such as pregnancy or getting a police record may require similar ability to resist romantic images of sex or violence and to make decisions against the



pressure of peers. It may be that the capacity for sound autonomous judgment and the capacity to resist external manipulation should be high on our list of minimum competencies. Unhappily, we know little about how to teach or test for such skills.

Let me summarize some of the main points of the discussion. I have argued that we should approach the question of minimal competencies as a question concerning the kinds of knowledge and skills that are of sufficient social importance that society should be entitled to coerce young people to acquire them. I have also suggested that society's fundamental interests in education are the avoidance of people who are politically and economically incompetent.

I then took up the suggestion that minimal political and economic competence should be understood primarily in terms of basic skills, especially minimal literacy. While I have some sympathy for this view, I have tried to show that the extent to which literacy is a minimal competence is dependent on the forms in which our society makes available basic political and economic information. I have also tried to show that other kinds of skills may have a plausible claim as minimal competencies. I suggested the capacities for sound and autonomous judgment and the capacity to resist manipulation.

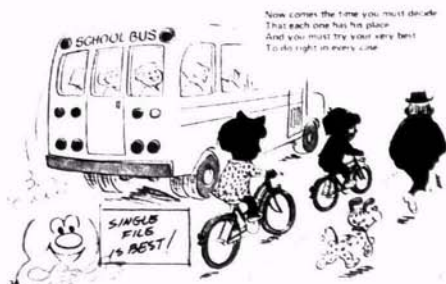
Let me close with two quick remarks. First, the notion that minimal competencies need to be justified in terms of prevention of harm to others does not inexorably lead to a focus on political and economic competence. Society also has a stake in such things as driving competence, respect for property, and reasonable attitudes toward alcohol consumption. In deciding whether to expand minimal competencies beyond the political and economic arena, we will have to ask questions such as "Is the problem fundamentally an educational problem?" and "What other devices does society have for its protection?"

Second, we need to remember that in developing minimal competencies for high school graduation we are altering the criteria for the distribution of a credential on which much depends. We need to be careful that in doing so we do not make access to jobs more difficult for minority youth or effect other undesirable changes in how youth are brought into America's political and economic life.

High school graduation occurs in a social context. Changes in the criteria for graduation must be considered in terms of that context. ^{FL}



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