

Editorial

The Hard Lot of the Professional in a Reform Movement

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Competency-based education is shaping up as the next major reform movement in American education. Legislatures in several large and influential states have passed laws establishing minimum competency requirements for promotion or graduation. Sometimes, as in my home state of California, these laws require all students to pass tests in reading, writing, arithmetic, and other academic skills. Sometimes, as in my neighboring state of Oregon, the competencies required are more practical—balancing a checkbook, writing a letter, applying for a job, and the like. Even in states that do not mandate competency testing, local districts may adopt it.

The main support for the movement toward competency-based education seems to come from the lay community rather than professional educators. Many lay people are concerned about youngsters who leave school unable to read, write, compute, or meet the skill demands of daily life in our complex society. Competency-based education is not without its supporters among teachers and school administrators, but my experience and reading suggest that most professional educators, and I would guess an even larger percentage of ASCD members, have grave reservations.

For my part, and I think my feelings are fairly widely shared by my colleagues in education, I am worried about competency-based education. I would like satisfying answers to a number of questions. How do we determine minimum competencies? Are the 3R's sufficient? What about practical skills? American history? Civics and government? A career entry skill? What level should be set as a minimum? Should students be able to spell 90 percent correctly, 100 percent, or 75 percent? Should we insist that they be able to read television ads and highway signs, the daily newspaper, or the Constitution?

Who is to make these decisions? Shall we have a vote of the people? Experts? Local teachers

or the state bureaucracies? How are we to avoid both the rigidities of a national system of minimums and the inequities and chaos of thousands of conflicting standards? Can we afford to develop reliable and valid tests corresponding to every district's standards, or will economic pressures and public demands for equity not force us into a nationwide set of standards? How are we to cope fairly with all the special circumstances that threaten test validity, such as test anxiety that causes some students to freeze up in test situations, or bilingualism, or learning disorders of various kinds? It is not surprising that lay people would overlook or discount such conceptual and technical problems. In their view the problem is simple, and all children must master basic skills.

If we manage to cope with all these conceptual and technical problems and implement a fair and effective system of competency-based education, will its impact on children, on the school, and on the society be positive and humane or destructive and inhumane? Will competency tests have the effect of labeling children age 13 or under "not competent" and segregating them from their peers for "special help?" Will the "failures" in this system be children of the poor, minorities, and disadvantaged families and, if so, will we again be blaming the victims? Will those who fail to meet our standards be denied a diploma and thus doomed to virtual unemployability, or will they be retained in classes composed primarily of younger students, with all the disruptions this is known to cause? Will it be possible to sustain a humane school environment amid the pressures of competency testing?

Because of these fears, I cannot enlist in the movement for competency-based education. But I am not ready to denounce it either. I cannot dismiss the equally plausible fears of the movement's supporters, fears that thousands of students each year leave our schools without the basic equip-

ment they need for making their way in our world. As it is, I believe the dangers of competency-based education are much greater than any benefits I can foresee. But I also believe the forces supporting competency-based education are far stronger than the forces opposing it, so that even if I and all my fellow professionals came out against it in the strongest terms, I believe the movement would still have enough support among the official lay bodies controlling education to be enacted in many states and localities.

As professional educators, we are going to have to cope with competency-based education whether we like it or not. Blind, unyielding opposition is not a constructive response. Nor is it a responsible one. Those of us who work in public education serve the public. It is irresponsible to ignore or dismiss the public's rightful, serious, and longstanding concern over the quality of the basic skills instruction their children receive.

What are we to do, then, those of us who cannot support competency-based education because we fear its harmful effects and cannot oppose it without ignoring our obligations to the public? Is there a constructive course of action open to us? I believe there is. In the short run, we can respond selectively and with discrimination to various proposals for competency-based education, so as to avoid the gravest dangers and maximize the positive consequences. In the long run, we must work to improve the means by which the public expresses and makes effective its wishes for education, so that we will not be faced with wave after wave of hastily-conceived, ill-considered reform movements capitalizing on public hysteria.

Professional educators *can* respond selectively to various features of competency-based programs and in so doing make something positive out of the movement. We can all support the movement's central aim—to help all young people attain the fundamental skills they need to function effectively. Let us accept this laudable

aim wholeheartedly without discarding our other educational ideals, such as maintaining a humane school environment. Let us struggle to find ways to accomplish the one without threatening the others.

Let us convince the movement's supporters that we genuinely share their concern for basic skills and that we consider mastery of basic skills to be an essential part of a humane education. Let us concentrate our opposition on any features of a competency-based system that would undermine our efforts toward humaneness. Let us do everything in our power to avoid labeling children as failures at age 13, segregating children from their fellows on the basis of test performance, treating linguistic or cultural minorities unfairly, or damaging a child's developing sense of identity. I think we will find that the great majority of supporters of competency-based education share these ideals of humane education and would, if they thought we were genuinely trying to respond to *their* concerns about basic skills, support us in our efforts to find humane ways to teach them.

In the long run, even the most constructive and responsible action by professional educators will yield only mixed results. Competency testing will be discovered to be expensive, and no one will want to pay. Evaluations will show mixed results at best. Those who favor competency-based education for the college-bound will fall out with those who see it as a way to combat functional illiteracy among low achievers. The public will lose interest. Abuses will begin to catch the headlines. Opponents who bided their time during the movement's heyday will come out in force to cast out the hard-won reforms. And some new reform will capture the public attention.

Still another group of reformers will be frustrated and direct their rage at the "unresponsive educational establishment." We will all become more pessimistic that the school system can be reformed. "It's hopeless," some will say. We professionals will be frustrated and angry, too. We

will have done our best to save a situation made perilous by the ham-handed interventions of a hysterical public only to be blamed for the very mistakes we tried so hard to prevent. If we wish to get out of this vicious, destructive cycle, we must attack it at its source. We must replace the convulsive nationwide educational reform movement as the primary means for making major improvements in the educational system and the chief vehicle for public input into and control of educational change.

We have slipped into relying on a process for making public policy in education that is cheap, familiar, convenient, and satisfyingly dramatic, but whose effects are ultimately destructive. Capitalizing on the public's sense of urgency about some impending crisis—domination by Soviet technology, riots in the cities, economic uncertainties—readiness of the public to blame all national failures on education, the leaders of the reform movement press their case at those centers of power where laymen largely unfamiliar with the educational system can be persuaded to "exercise leadership" in this crisis. A law is passed, monies are appropriated, policies are officially adopted favoring the innovation touted as the panacea for the currently urgent problem. The allure of the role of pioneer attracts initial converts in schools and in other, more dispersed centers of educational leadership. There is a mad rush to get on the bandwagon, to be "modern" and "innovative." Opposition, however well-argued, is considered "resistance to innovation." Unrealistic promises are made in the name of the reform. Talk of the dangers that attend it, that attend any untried scheme, is ignored if it cannot be suppressed. An attitude of "we" (reformers) versus "them" (footdragging defenders of the status quo) is fomented. Educational leaders are persuaded that it is their responsibility to see that the reform is implemented. To question the wisdom of the innovation or its appropriateness to the local conditions is to risk one's reputation as a

dynamic leader. Parents who support the reform are instructed, in the name of lay control, in how to *fight* recalcitrant local school personnel. This approach to educational reform may be as American as witchhunts, evangelistic revivals, political conventions, muckraking journalism, or the hula hoop, but it is a terribly ineffective way to implement the public will for education. Worse, it sows seeds of bitterness, mistrust, and antagonism that interfere with long-term educational improvement. I fear it may be destroying American public education.

We as professionals must work to replace it with a more effective and constructive approach to public policy-making for education. Why not begin with the reform movement before us now? Let us work at local, state, and national levels to secure a thorough public airing of the pros and cons of competency-based education in an atmosphere of working together to improve education. Let us come forward with positive proposals to secure the improvements in basic skills instruction the public rightly desires without the negative consequences we foresee from a simplistic approach to competency testing. It is a long, hard, thankless task, but I can think of no greater contribution to American education in our time than to replace this negative and debilitating cycle of reform movements with a constructive and effective approach to educational policy-making that builds confidence among public and professionals alike that we can make steady progress together in improving our educational system. *DF*



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