

Minimum Competencies— The Oregon Approach

David G. Savage

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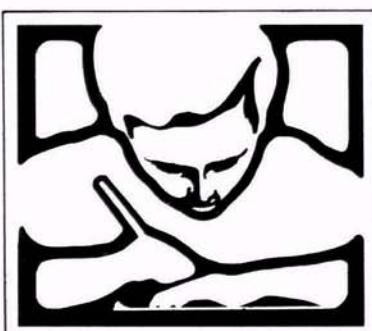
Oregon, the first state to bring you a ban on disposable cans and bottles, a no-growth policy, and a "go home" sign for visitors, was also the first to bring the talk of "minimal competencies" to education. What was started there in 1972 has since been picked up across the nation, but Oregon's situation remains unique. While many states—Florida being the best known example—simply administer a statewide test, Oregon let each school district establish and measure its own set of competency standards. Some have devised 12; others set more than 200. Oregon also phased in its new high school graduation requirements over a four-year period. The result has been a grand experiment in curriculum change, or to listen to critics, in curriculum upheaval.

This year's high school seniors were the first class to have to meet the minimal standards in the basics—the ability to "read, write, speak, listen, analyze, and compute." Again unlike Florida, there were no mass failures. Many high school principals could not identify a single student who failed to graduate solely because of the competency requirement. Those who did fail also lacked enough course credits to graduate. So, after four years of work, how has the competency program changed education in Oregon?

Most district curriculum directors, while acknowledging that mistakes have been made, say the program has been more good than bad. According to Dean Tate, assistant superintendent for the Reynolds district near Portland: "The state mandated program has had a beneficial effect in this district. It has given us the impetus to develop a more totally coordinated program. It has necessitated that our teachers develop course goals, performance indicators, and realistic minimums."

Woodburn superintendent Jens Robinson said in a letter to the Oregon School Boards Association, "The new minimum standards have caused this district to take the healthiest and freshest look at its curriculum imaginable. We have teachers now involved in

developing curriculum; a third to one-half of our staff have been actively involved. The idea of stating goals in behavioral terms is a concept I highly endorse. It's about time we were specific about what we intend to obtain from education and set about seriously working toward achieving that goal. And the more specific those goals are stated, the better chance we have of achieving them." Other administrators talked of "a healthy dialogue" on curriculum, "stronger course statements," and a renewed commitment to teaching



the basics. Said State Superintendent Verne Duncan, "I think the process itself has been beneficial. We've been forced to rethink the value of our diploma, open it up for discussion. It has created a healthy dialogue about the curriculum."

The Evolution of Competencies in Oregon

The idea of a minimal competency has undergone an interesting evolution in Oregon. In 1972, when the state board of education first proposed the new graduation requirements, the then Superintendent of Public Instruction Dale Parnell talked of "survival skills." Unquestionably, the competency movement has been fueled by a distrust of education and educators. To a degree, the idea of requiring students to "apply" knowledge or "demonstrate" skills seemed to revive the supposed dichotomy between "book learning" and the "real world." That is, "Sure, our children went to school for 12 years, but can they get along in the real world?" Under the new system, students were to demonstrate their skills on a series of tasks, rather like accumulating merit badges to become an eagle scout. But what were these tests of supposedly fundamental skills? Examples include balancing a checkbook, reading an apartment rental agreement, changing a flat tire, or computing gas mileage. Thus, by implication, if you can't compute gas mileage or balance a checkbook, you have about as much chance of surviving in this society as a greenhouse next to a driving range.

But recognizing how applying knowledge could lead to narrow, trivial tests—one district had students make peanut butter sandwiches as a test of following directions—many districts fell back on traditional academic tests. If a student could pass a reading test, then he or she had met the minimal competency in reading.

But this poses another problem. The competency movement arose as a check on a current system, an expression of distrust for teachers and the traditional academic requirements. A high school graduate in Oregon must already pass 21 credits, meaning that a teacher has certified the student has minimal knowledge or skills in each of these areas. If the competency requirement became simply another academic test, how is it different?

In fact, several students made just that point. "I haven't failed one competency, and I did them in just five minutes," said Cindy Silveria, a Salem student. "One staff member marked off nine competencies for me while we were standing in the hall. A lot of those skills I had when I was 12, and I don't think I'm exceptional."

Alan Lineberger, a senior from Albany, said teachers "give competencies on a test as test questions. If you pass that question, you pass the competency. They are really easy to do; they only take five minutes. My friends and I feel it's more of a hassle than anything else. It's just time consuming and we look at it as another hurdle."

Their students' views resemble those of the teachers, who have been consistently and bitterly critical of the system. "We were initially enthused about the idea, but it's turned out to be a disaster," said Bob Crumpton, executive director of the Oregon Education Association.

The number one complaint has been paperwork. In some districts, teachers have to monitor students to see that they have passed more than 100 different competency requirements, all in addition to monitoring their regular course work. Not surprisingly, some districts have turned to computers. Each student has a long computer printout that tells which requirements he/she has completed and which are still unfinished. "There's a terrible hodge-podge of standards across the state, so that a kid can't transfer from one district to another without a huge hassle," Crumpton continued. Teachers also complain that the entire system is a waste of time for good students and unfair and detrimental to poor students. "Rather than helping a supposedly incompetent kid, we stamp on their forehead that they are stupid," Crumpton said.

What Is a Minimum Competency?

Administrators readily admit they don't have a solution for the problem of when is a minimal competency too minimal. Several principals acknowledged that 95 percent of their students see the requirements as trivial and a waste of time. "We are really talking about the marginal students," said Edwin Schneider, Portland's assistant superintendent for instruction. One consistent recommendation to the state board is that the

competencies be certified well before high school and that the effort be concentrated on marginal students.

The key debate on what is a competency and how should it be measured is far from over. You can sit around a table with Verne Duncan and other top state officials and hear sharply divergent views on this question. For example, Gordon Ascher, an associate state superintendent, believes strongly that students should have to demonstrate or apply their knowledge on specific tasks. "I think Florida took the easy way out by giving a statewide test. We've tried to tie the curriculum to what a student will need in the real world. That's what sets us apart," he said. "Of course, that's not easy . . . so a lot of states have gone right back to giving a reading test."

But Duncan's top deputy, Ron Burge, takes an opposite view. "Our job is to teach the basics, not to try to devise hundreds of minor tasks that an individual will have to complete in his lifetime. If a student can read, then I'm confident he can read an apartment rental agreement." Burge also says that demonstrating abilities is "not realistic" for education. Too many important abilities, like understanding democracy or developing a good self-concept, simply can't be measured by specific tasks.

This disagreement, which has shown up at state-sponsored workshops on the competency program, has caused some confusion and resentment among district administrators. And even though the state department under Duncan was moving away from the idea of "survival skills," the state board altered the definition of a competency in 1976 to say it should represent "demonstrable ability to apply knowledge, understanding, and/or skills." Duncan admits "this was a significant change, but I didn't realize it then." He calls the competencies "just another tool of accountability" and says he is interested in assuring that students learn the basics, not that they can apply them in specific narrow tasks.

The state education department, not surprisingly, has been criticized by teachers and administrators for a "lack of leadership." Crumpton of OEA says, "When we've needed leadership from the state department, they've stuck their heads in the sand."

But as Duncan sees it, he is in a "damned-if-



Verne A. Duncan, Oregon superintendent of public instruction, and a key supporter of Oregon's new graduation requirements, visits classrooms weekly. Photo: John Kirkpatrick, Portland School District.

you-do, damned-if-you-don't" situation. Local administrators resent specific state mandates—"local control is more than a phrase here," he says—but they also are resentful because the state has set forth no guidelines on implementing the competency program. Recently, the state department said it would issue guidelines and models, but not rules, for developing competency standards.

So far, Oregon's districts have surely taken advantage of their freedom. Seemingly, there is no typical approach. On the one end is the Portland school district, which has tended to downplay the new standards and issued only 12. "The public thinks this is a rather simple, straightforward issue. But once you get into it, you realize it's very complex," said Schneider. "We didn't want to create a series of motherhood statements, but a lot of important skills aren't that measurable." He believes that most districts have established far too many competencies, so that the new requirements are "driving the curriculum," a comment heard often around the state.

The Beaverton public schools in the Portland suburbs took quite a different approach. The teachers and administrators got together in a brainstorming session to set what they believed to be important skills or knowledge. After some pairing, the district ended up with 127 compe-

tency statements. Many simply break down the basic skills into greater detail. For example, number seven is "a student can determine the meaning and pronunciation of words," while number eight is "a student can demonstrate comprehension of word meanings."

But some go beyond the basics to set forth at least one view of a basic education. For example, a student must be able to display information on a graph, convert measurements to the metric system, "demonstrate a knowledge of elementary genetics," "identify characteristics of his/her cultural group as one among many cultures of the world," and "knows the effect of urbanization on the environment." George Russell, Beaverton's deputy superintendent for instruction, is generally pleased with the competency standards. "I think it has caused us to take a closer look at what we were doing. We now have stronger, sequential course descriptions." But like other administrators, he was not sure of its impact on students. "I can't say that we've done anything for the marginal student."

Salem has 35 "competency indicators," what superintendent Bill Kendrick calls a "manageable number." All are demonstrations of knowledge. For example, "read a standard apartment rental agreement and select and state at least three conditions which either party of the agreement must fulfill." Or "develop a list of environmental problems facing society," both urban and rural. Salem's diploma "has more credibility with the public now," said Kendrick in citing one advantage of the new system. "We didn't want to make the competencies the focus of our education program. They are really minimal skills, so we've kept it as just a minor part of what we do." But Kendrick feels that the education program, with the competency requirements, is "better than what we had before. A kid leaving here can point to some very specific tasks that he has completed. And that's good."

Competencies Reviewed

For the past few months, the entire program has been undergoing a review by Duncan and the state board. A legislative task force, headed by Senator Clifford Trow, said last December that it had "serious reservations" about using minimal

competencies as graduation requirements. Since most of the skills were minimal, the commission recommended they be checked off during the elementary and junior high years. The report also urged the state department to establish more uniform requirements among the districts and to provide remedial help for those who need it. Two other recommendations echoed the views of many educators. First, if the requirements remain on the high school level, districts should be able to waive the requirements for able students. Secondly, "If continued, the competency requirements should be regarded as a floor to education achievement, and the floor should not be allowed to become so important that it lowers the ceiling."

Duncan acknowledges that "indsight is much better" and that some changes should be made. But he has also been careful not to derail the train before it gets moving.

Perhaps one of the most perceptive analyses of the new competency system appears in a brief booklet recently published by the Oregon ASCD chapter. Says the editor Anne Wax, a vice-principal at Fowler Junior High in Tigard: "If this were the 1950s, I don't think we would need the competency requirements. But in the 1960s, when we were concentrating on other things, we got lax about enforcing standards. The challenge now should be to combine the rigor of the fifties and the humanism of the sixties. We must develop curricula that retain the best aspects of both eras."

What continues to be the most encouraging aspect of Oregon's program is the sincere and thoughtful effort put forth by so many administrators and teachers. Traveling to school districts around the state resembles a brief seminar in curriculum development. It is a grand experiment that is far from over. *TL*



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