

Effects of Minimum Competencies on Promotion Standards

Bob L. Taylor

"What may be the impact of the accountability movement and the legislation of competency-based high school graduation examinations on promotion standards?" Several such effects are examined here.

Frequently, standards for promotion have been based on either arbitrarily established criteria by teachers or other authorities, or norm-based criteria related to group performance. The completion of a learning plan should result in some type of demonstrated behavior change by the student with respect to knowledge, attitudes, or skills. The student should meet a prescribed level of performance for promotion, and certainly, in a sequence of courses, must demonstrate the necessary performance level to succeed with the next course. If the student is completing a graduation requirement concerned with survival-level competencies, he/she must perform at a level that would enable him/her to cope in real-life situations. This approach to promotion standards ignores establishing standards related to individual student differences. For years, many educators have advocated the individualized approach to promotion standards.

Traditional Standards

What are some of the issues in the traditional approach to promotion standards? If a student does not meet the required performance level for promotion, should he/she repeat the course? Both practice and research have indicated that repeating courses usually has not been a productive way of bringing a student up to the desired performance level.¹ If the student does not

pass a required course, then graduation is denied. Can an administrator justify that any single course is of such great importance that the student should not graduate because of it? What level of performance must the student demonstrate to pass and why?²

These are issues, and they are the ones currently bringing about change in the operation of schools. While traditional ways of handling promotion continue to function satisfactorily in many situations, changes are being made in school practice to meet some of the issues raised by the accountability movement and the competency-based high school graduation examination legislation.³ In this paper, the assumption is made that the accountability movement and the graduation examination requirement legislation are not based on a public demand to fail more students, but on a desire of the public for more students to graduate who meet a minimum set of survival-level competencies that point to their more effective participation in society.



¹ Gordon Cawelti, "National Competency Testing, A Bogus Solution." *Phi Delta Kappan* 59:621; May 1978.

² Gene Glass commented on this issue in: "Mastery of Minimums Dilemma: To Test or Not to Test Is the Question." *NAEP Newsletter* 4:1; August 1977.

³ Chris Pipho, "Minimum Competency Testing: A Look at State Standards." *Social Education* 42:368; May 1978.

Competency-Based Standards

Under the competency-based approach, standards for promotion are established by the objectives of the course stated in behavioral terms and by the criteria of performance statements in the objectives. Certainly, this makes for a clearer understanding of the standards that are being used than the traditional promotion standards mentioned earlier; however, this is only a partial solution to the broader issues raised by accountability and high school graduation examination laws.

In recent years, state education agencies and local school agencies have become more concerned with minimum survival-level competencies as the primary objectives of public schooling. The Oregon list of competencies is a good example, and it provides us with insight into the issue of what requirements are so important that a student should not graduate until they have been met. Oregon mandated three competency areas with these respective components:

Personal Development:

1. Basic skills—reading, writing, computing, listening, speaking, and analyzing
2. Understanding of scientific and technological processes
3. Understanding of the principles involved in maintaining a healthy mind and body
4. The skills to remain a life-long learner

Social Responsibility:

1. With regard to local and state government as well as national government
2. In personal interactions with the environment
3. On the streets and highways
4. As a consumer of goods and services

Career Development:

1. Skills within the student's chosen career field
2. Good work habits and attitudes
3. The ability to maintain good interpersonal relationships
4. The ability to make appropriate career decisions
5. Entry-level skills for their chosen career fields.⁴

How are these broad objectives operational-

ized in a specific school district? As presented in Figure 1,⁵ the goals for the Eugene, Oregon, schools include goals, competencies, and performance indicators.

Figure 1. Personal Development—Science and Technology

Program Goals	Competencies	Performance Indicators	Criterion Reference
1.3.8 Students will understand the continuity of living things.	1.3.8.1 The student explains transmission of characteristics from parent to offspring.	1.3.8.1.1 The student explains how physical traits are passed from generation to generation.	Teacher judgment.

As the example indicates, the Oregon goals are broken down into hundreds of specific objectives. Throughout the United States, more and more states, and more and more local school districts are identifying special competencies and performance criteria that students should meet for promotion and graduation.

Again, the level of performance is an important issue here. Certainly, all students will not be at the same level of performance or sophistication with respect to these competencies. For many bright students, these competencies will be accomplished through regular academic course work stressing an understanding of the theoretical base for the competencies. In the past, bright, college-bound students have been able to achieve these competencies through a college preparatory curriculum, and they have been able to generalize from theoretical principles taught in subject-centered courses to needed understandings that provided survival-level competencies. This continues to be the situation for these students.

Many students of average ability will find in their general education curriculum concrete instruction in these competencies and adequate drill for them to gain the needed level of performance for life coping. In fact, the majority of the students will gain the needed instruction in survival-level competencies from their regular instructional program. Traditional promotion standards will be in operation here.

⁴ Oregon Graduation Requirements: Administrative Guidelines, Section 1. Graduation Requirements Task Force. Salem, Oregon: State Department of Education; 1973. pp. 18-24.

⁵ Education Requirements: Competencies. Eugene, Oregon: School District 4J, Eugene Public Schools.

Individual Standards⁶

At times, some students need special assistance in order to accomplish these competencies at a functional level. This brings us to the basic issue of what should be the nature of the remedial work conducted with students who do not meet the performance standards. The changes in school practices are coming here with respect to promotional standards. Schools are expected to promote and graduate more and more students without watering down minimum performance standards for the survival-level competencies. While educators are concerned with promotional standards and remedial programs, their evaluation programs have tended not to be comprehensive enough in the past. There is a need for more systematic programs of evaluation and reporting. In the area of survival skills, the schools need more comprehensive programs of diagnosis and remediation as well as evaluation. The school district is accountable to the public that students have acquired the necessary survival skills and meet the desired levels of competency. These actions must be backed by hard data in order to maintain public confidence.

The school district's plan for diagnosis, remediation, and evaluation is actually operationalized at the building level. The stress at this level is on specific diagnostic and remediation efforts. As stated earlier, in the majority of cases, the district objectives with respect to minimum competencies can be met through the regular curriculum. However, in some cases, special programs need to be introduced to provide for individual differences. These may be remedial or alternative programs depending on the students who are being served. An extensive system of records needs to be maintained at the building level for each student. Profiles on students should be available to demonstrate both their needs and progress. For students with special problems, alternative programs should be introduced to aid them in meeting promotion and graduation requirements.

If the basic issues regarding promotion standards are to be met, it is at the classroom level where the action should be taken. Teachers are concerned with basic competencies, and they know if their students have mastered them. However, teachers should help identify students who

need special aid, and in many cases, teachers can be of assistance to individual students through their regular instruction. In a majority of cases, the classroom teacher certifies that the student has met the basic competency by awarding him or her a passing grade in a regular course in the curriculum. The student has completed the course objectives at an acceptable performance level.

This decision is made where the instruction is taking place, and the teacher plays a major role in it. If the building plan of diagnosis, remediation, and evaluation is to be successful, the teacher must take a major part in it. This requires an emphasis on these behaviors by the instructor:

1. Teachers need to be more specific about their instructional objectives.
2. Teachers need to make greater use of formative evaluation.
3. At times, teachers need to individualize instruction.
4. Teachers need to have affective objectives as well as cognitive ones for their instruction.
5. Teachers need to conduct diagnostic activities in connection with their regular classes.
6. Teachers need to keep more extensive records on students' performances.
7. Teachers need to include remedial instruction in regular lessons.
8. Teachers need to be more humanistic in their approach to regular instruction.

In the final analysis, it is the classroom teacher who has the greatest knowledge of the students' achievements; hence, the teacher should be the first person concerned with identifying problems and correcting them. This is part of the teacher's job. Naturally, the teacher must have clear objectives and priorities with respect to instruction. Where the classroom teacher is not making progress with students on survival-level competencies, the teacher should help to plan an alternative experience for the student using the resources of the school and the school district.

Traditional promotion standards function

⁶ Much of this section is taken from an article written by the author for the newsletter: *School and University Review*. Boulder, Colorado: School of Education, University of Colorado, Summer 1978.

satisfactorily in many learning situations, and probably will continue to be the basis for decision making in the majority of promotion decisions. Currently, interest in competency-based standards is growing. What competencies are so important that a student should not be promoted or graduated until he or she has met them? What level of performance does a student need in survival-level competencies? What remedial-work plan should be used with students who do not achieve the mandated competencies? Because of these issues with respect to promotion standards, there are changes taking place.

1. More and more states and school districts are identifying the minimum survival-level competencies that students must have to cope with life.

2. Many students are meeting these competencies through the regular classroom situation with the classroom teacher deciding on the level of performance required.

3. For those students having difficulty meeting the required competencies at the expected level of performance, programs of remediation

are being introduced. These programs include diagnosis, remediation, and evaluation plans. For some students, alternative programs are being provided by which they may achieve the minimum survival-level competencies through an individualized instructional plan.

4. It is predictable that the political pressures accompanying the accountability movement and the competency-based high school graduation examination legislation will result in more stress being placed on individual promotion standards. The difficulties produced by these laws will accentuate the need to give individual differences greater recognition in all instructional and evaluation plans. [E]



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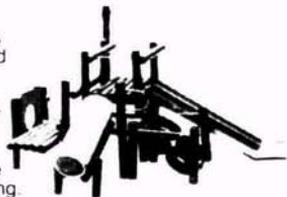
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