

Conflicting Views on Competency Testing in Florida

Ron Brandt

Issues that concern educators everywhere are raised by critics and defenders of minimum competency testing in Florida, part of that state's accountability program.

During the summer, a five-member panel chaired by Ralph W. Tyler raised serious objections to the Florida Minimum Competencies Testing Program. The panel members, who were sponsored by the National Education Association and the Florida Teaching Profession-NEA, held public hearings in Florida before preparing their report.

They criticized both the strategy chosen by Florida for achieving accountability and the way it was put into effect. The strategy was seriously faulty, according to the panel, because it violated the legislature's own policy of school-based management. Not only that, but officials acted so hurriedly that those who were expected to make the plan work and those affected by it were not adequately involved.

The controversy arose because state legislation passed in 1976 required the Florida Department of Education to conduct a statewide testing program. Requirements for high school graduation were to be set by each school district, but they had to include mastery of the basic skills and satisfactory performance in functional literacy.

The Department developed tests for both purposes and administered them during the 1977-78 school year. Basic skills tests were given in grades three, five, eight, and eleven and functional literacy tests in grade eleven. Of the eleventh-grade students who took the functional literacy test, 92 percent passed the communications part, but only 64 percent passed the mathematics part. Those who failed will take the tests again during the current school year. According to announced plans, they must pass in order to receive a regular diploma.

Members of the NEA study panel other than Tyler were Stephen Lapan of Northeastern Illinois University; Judith Moore, teacher from Maitland, Florida; L. Wendell Rivers of St. Louis University; and Donna Skibo, high school teacher from St. Petersburg, Florida.

Here is a collage of excerpts from the panel report¹ along with comments from Ralph Tyler and from Carey Ferrell, Director of the Division of Public Schools, and Thomas Fisher, Director of the Student Assessment Section, both of the Florida Department of Education. Tyler and Fisher spoke at a conference sponsored by National Assessment of Educational Progress in June 1978. In addition, Tyler and Ferrell were interviewed separately by Ron Brandt, editor of *Educational Leadership*.

¹ Ralph W. Tyler, et al. *The Florida Accountability Program: An Evaluation of Its Educational Soundness and Implementation*. Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1978.



Ralph Tyler at the NAEP conference, June 1978. Photo: NAEP.

Public Understanding

Tyler: We blame the State Department because they did not explain to the public that scores on tests are not necessarily an indication of what students are being taught in school. They should have explained in advance, for example, how a county might have more than 70 percent of the eleventh graders not succeed on the test. In a county where there is a large number of migrant workers, test scores are not a sign of how well teachers teach. You have to determine where the children were to begin with.

One black woman who testified before us said that she had scrimped and saved and got her son to stay in school, but now it appeared he would not get a diploma. The schools, she said, must be terrible. Before a State Department institutes programs,

it must help the public understand what the implications are.

Ferrell: We held statewide meetings. We held regional meetings around the state with principals, district administrators, staff. We held individual workshops in many school districts. There was a tremendous amount of publicity in the newspapers throughout the state. So I don't agree with the panel's view that teachers and parents were uninformed.

Fisher: Parents have been very frustrated by the closed nature of schools. You don't have to go far to find a situation in which a child is in a classroom with a teacher who is totally incompetent. The parent gets no satisfaction when he or she speaks up about the situation. The principal does nothing about evaluating the teacher or

helping the teacher. That's why we have accountability programs. Parents are ticked off at us, the educators. They are tired of having their children go through school and not learn. And that includes a lot of black parents in Florida as well as others.

Tyler: I think the strategy should have begun with the notion, "Sure, these teachers want to do well. So do the parents. So do the children. What they need is help." Instead there was passing the buck in a political way. (NAEP Conference)

The Panel

Fisher: Let me talk a little about the politics from the NEA side. NEA officials claimed that the five members of the panel would be objective, and they had no idea what the panel would recommend. I think in all honesty that's probably true. But in these situations it is not necessary to know in advance what the panel members are going to say. All that is necessary is to select people who are known to have certain backgrounds and experiences, feelings, and philosophies. You dramatically increase the probability that you are going to get a report that goes in the direction you wish it to go. I have no complaint about that, but one must take the findings with a grain of salt.

Tyler: The role of testimony was to try to get the facts.

The role of the panel was to interpret the facts based on how the panel members understand learning and how schools operate. The facts are fairly clear. The state commissioner felt you could put pressure on from the top. We take the view that to really improve learning in the classrooms you have to involve teachers. That is not, of course, a matter of fact; our view is based on experience working in and with schools.

The Situation

Panel Report: In the past the schools sorted their students, giving failing grades to those who had difficulty in learning and encouraging those who learned easily. And while most of the other students went on to graduate from high school, those who received low grades soon dropped out and found jobs requiring little education. This practice is no longer acceptable in a technological nation. Those who drop out are largely unemployable and live on welfare funds. Hence, young people are urged to stay in school, and the school is expected to find ways of teaching those who do not respond to traditional educational practices. This is a new task for American schools, and most of them need assistance in learning how to effectively teach children who in the past have not learned easily (p. 2).

Tyler: Most people don't realize that the schools have



NAEP conference, June 1978. Photo: NAEP.

slowly been reaching a larger and larger proportion of people. For example, at the time our Declaration of Independence was signed, historians estimate that perhaps 15 percent of our adults were literate. People didn't have to be literate in a society of backwoodsmen, pioneers, and farmers.

At the time of the First World War, two million men were inducted into the service, and the Army Alpha tests were given for the first time. We discovered that only about 35 percent of the young adults inducted into the army were literate (that is, at fourth-grade reading level or above). By the time of the Second World War, it was up to 55 percent. And according to the last National Assessment, the level is now about 80 percent. The public generally does not understand this slow process of developing

an educational system intended to reach everybody.

Part of it is that in the early days we did not think of some people—slaves, poor immigrants, the handicapped, and so on—as being educable.

Minority Students

Ferrell: I'm convinced education is better today than it was ten years ago when we were struggling through the throes of desegregation in our public school system in the South. But I think we do have a long way to go before our programs are completely adequate. For example, it was not too long ago that many people didn't really care what was happening in black schools in the South. Black students were written off. On many of our standardized tests; we calculated separate percentiles for them.



The five-member NEA panel, chaired by Ralph Tyler (center), conduct a public hearing in Florida before preparing their report. Photo: Tommye Hutto, FTP-NEA.

Some of us, like myself, who were involved in the process of desegregation went to the public and said that mixing of races would not harm the quality of education; that white students would do just as well, and there would be substantial upgrading of education for the blacks. The first part is true; I don't think we've harmed the performance of whites, but I don't think we've done enough for minority students. We've thrust them into an environment built around white middle-class students without really bothering to recognize their special and individual needs.

Panel Report: If it was known by those responsible for the development and field-testing of the Functional Literacy Test that low socioeconomic status is highly correlated with low test performance, then why

were the children who fall into this category exposed to an assessment experience known to be one on which they could not perform successfully? It appears as if the current class of eleventh-graders who are black and poor were sacrificed for the purpose of rapid implementation of the functional literacy segment of the Accountability Act. It is evident that there was little active concern for the appropriateness of the testing program for a large segment of the school population (the black and poor) (p. 12).

Ferrell: The accountability program—especially the testing—is forcing us to look at the problem; forcing us to look at those children as individuals.

The Testing Program

Fisher: The program is very

simple. Define what are the basic skills that teachers say are important; administer a test; send the results back to the school. Then it is up to the local teacher to look at the data, affirm that the results are in fact an indication of that student's level in functioning, design proper remedial instruction if it is warranted, and make a decision after the appropriate length of time whether or not the student has mastered the skills and can move on.

In the case of the functional literacy tests it's a slightly different situation, of course. There we do not give the teachers the right to override the test results. We do, however, permit numerous opportunities for the test to be retaken and again appropriate remedial instruction is to be provided (NAEP Conference).

Panel Report: The program

(uses) a score on a single test as a basis for denying a regular high school diploma. This seems to overlook the fact that students differ in their reactions to tests, some becoming tense and unable to express themselves under the usual test conditions. The accepted educational practice when making important educational decisions about a child is to obtain and consider evidence from several sources, including grades given by teachers who have had many hours of contact with the student (p. 8).

Public Reaction to Test Results

Ferrell: Many people felt that the poor showing of our students on eleventh-grade functional literacy tests last fall was going to result in the public pointing a finger at teachers. That hasn't happened. Everybody, from the legislature right on down, has approached the problem in a very positive manner.

Tyler: Assessment results can help stimulate public discussion, but Florida already had an assessment program. Their program—which was not a minimum competency testing program—was started in the early 1970s. They had results that they could have discussed with the public; results that showed, for example, that there was a great deal of low achievement in areas populated mostly by blacks and other minority groups. Instead of involving the public in discussion of what to

do, they began testing individual students.

Ferrell: Yes, we had assessment results, which indicated that our students in Florida were not much different from students around the country. But no one really paid much attention to that; they kind of shrugged it off. But all of a sudden we were faced with a requirement that students had to meet a certain standard in order to graduate from high school. That got the attention of the public, and people began asking questions about why the results were as they were.

Public Concern

Tyler: It's difficult to know all the reasons for the public becoming excited about something, but this has happened several times before. I remember, for example, a national conference on "The Crisis in Education" in 1935. It was called because standards were dropping, discipline was bad, and so on.

What happened this time, I suspect, is that we tried in the 1960s to solve some major social problems. We felt there shouldn't be poverty anymore because ours was an affluent society. Our aspirations were heightened by a sense of exhilaration about what could be done. We were committed to reaching everybody, including minority groups. But then we discovered that things don't change that rapidly. So now there is a period of disillusion-

ment, and various social institutions are being blamed.

School and Community

Tyler: In any advanced society the education of children and youth is not done only in the school. The education system of America includes the home, religious institutions, work experiences, the community, and the mass media. If you reflect upon your own education, you will realize how much you learned from places outside the school. The school has an important role, but its role is primarily to help open up for young people the scholarship of our culture so that they may be informed and become able to use the tools of learning.

The motivation for learning, the opportunity to apply what is being learned, the development of habits of orderly work, being on time, and so forth, were not usually the responsibility of the school, but were largely developed in the home and community. The sense of what it is to work was provided in the past by the responsibility for doing chores at home and then part-time jobs elsewhere. As soon as we talk about accountability or inadequacies in the education of our children and youth, we must immediately ask ourselves what is the total system, who is accountable for what. Ever since the *Brown vs. Topeka* decision of 1954, teachers have been getting signals that the public wanted them to provide access to groups of

young people who were previously not considered important enough for schools. In the South, for example, the black schools were not considered terribly important. Whether or not the children did well in school was relatively unimportant. After 1954, people in this country began to be concerned that all children, including poor black children, should be educated.

Then there are the stringent labor laws and the increased minimum wage that makes it almost impossible for a young person to be employable. We have kept young people off the labor market and demanded that they stay in school. We have dropout programs. Teachers have been given the message that the important thing is to reach a lot of people and to keep them in school. Then suddenly the public says, "Well, if they're in school and are all the way to the twelfth grade without minimum skills, why didn't you force them out at the eighth or ninth grade?"

There are political overtones to that because a number of special interest groups have particular interests related to the talk of accountability. Taxpayers in Florida, as in California where I live, include a large number of retired people. Taxpayers see their taxes going up because the value of land has gone up, and they begin to worry about where it's being spent. Since education in most states is the largest user of property taxes, some taxpayers begin

trying to show that the schools aren't doing their job so they can reduce expenditures for education (NAEP Conference).

What Should Have Been Done

Panel Report: The earlier assessment program developed from the Educational Accountability Act of 1971 had clearly indicated that there were many children in the Florida schools who were not learning much of what the schools are expected to teach. This assessment also identified school districts where there were large concentrations of children having difficulty in learning. Research and experience in other states have shown that the particular problems chiefly influential in the poor performance of children are different in different populations and different kinds of communities. Often the factors are different with different children coming from the same population and in the same community. Furthermore, children differ in assets they have on which effective learning programs can be built. Many teachers have not had experience in identifying individual problems and locating individual assets. In such cases, they need assistance in developing appropriate programs for their students.

For these reasons a strategy likely to be effective could have begun in 1976, providing the needed assistance. The Department of Education could have worked closely with those schools (not districts) in which

concentrations of children having difficulties were located.

Assisting local schools to develop promising programs of instruction designed to attack the particular problems in each school, and to utilize the assets found in the children having difficulties, is a constructive initial stage. Later, the development of appropriate standards of achievement at the several grade and age levels, including appropriate standards for graduation from high school, could be done more adequately. To ensure consideration of the various interests concerned, the development of standards should actively involve the parents of the school, other interested adults including employers, teachers, and the students (p. 3).

Minimum Standards

Ferrell: The adoption of minimum performance standards is said by the panel to be inconsistent with school-based management, but that reflects a total misunderstanding on the part of the panel as to what school-based management is. The state is setting minimal standards that apply to everybody, but each district is also required to adopt additional standards.

Tyler: Standards should be set at the grassroots level. Let me illustrate. When I was working as a consultant for what was thought to be the worst ghetto area in Detroit, the four schools



Carey Ferrell, Director of the Division of Public Schools, Florida Department of Education.



Thomas A. Fisher, Director of the Student Assessment Section, Florida Department of Education.

in the project assessed the reading ability of students at the end of third grade. They found that only 35 percent of them could read material representing the goals of third grade. The school wanted to set a standard to work toward, and so did the parents. After some discussion the parents and the teachers decided that it would be reasonable to aim for 45 percent. That was achieved, so the next year the goal was set at 55 percent and so on. By the end of a three-year period, the children were achieving as well as the white children in an adjoining district. That is how I believe standards should be set. If you set standards that teachers believe are unattainable, they don't want to be humiliated so they will find various ways to avoid them. Standards have to be set reasonably close to where the work goes on.

Ferrell: I definitely feel there should be minimal standards that every student should be expected to achieve. Well, not every student—not those with learning disabilities or the mentally retarded—but those who have the capabilities. Not only is it reasonable that every student should be expected to achieve minimum standards, but the school system should be held accountable for seeing that it is done.

Educating vs. Credentialing

Panel Report: A real dilemma is encountered when an educational institution is also responsible for issuing credentials. This is a central problem in a minimum competency testing program. Credentials such as a driver's license or a barber's license are based on a single standard, while multiple standards are used to stimulate learn-

ing among students who are varied in their backgrounds and abilities. The standard usually set on a driver's license represents the knowledge and skill thought to be necessary to drive safely. In a school, however, each child needs to work for a standard that requires putting forth effort to attain it but is reasonably within his or her power to reach. This means that a teacher sets a standard in terms of the student's present attainment requiring him or her to go further but not a standard seemingly so difficult that the student won't try.

This is clearly sensible. In teaching children to make a high jump, the standard to be reached by the child who now jumps three feet six inches is perhaps three feet nine inches, while an appropriate standard to encourage further learning by a child who jumps four feet

seven inches would be four feet ten inches. If each child is to be challenged and encouraged to learn, the standards in a typical classroom will be different for different children. The institution of a single competency measure is appropriate for granting a credential, but should not become a central practice of schools and teachers whose function is to increase student learning (pp. 3-4).

Tyler: Credentialing is different from educating. Credentialing is not intended to improve education; it is to protect people. A driver's license, for example, is intended to protect the public from unsafe drivers.

Ferrell: The high school diploma is in fact a credential. In the state of Florida one of the basic requirements to get into a community college or to get into a state university is a high school diploma. It's also a requirement for many occupations. Practically every job in state government requires a high school diploma; for many such jobs, it is the sole criterion. Whether or not you wish to consider it a credential, the laws have made it one. If it is going to be a credential, it must mean something.

Tyler: It's usually a symbol that you have completed the requirements of a particular institution. No one considers a diploma from a little-known school to be the equivalent of a diploma from what they believe is a first-rate institution.

I am not sure what purpose is served by considering the diploma a credential. If we wanted to reform the nature of our high school diploma and do as they used to do in England with the Oxford examination given all over the world, that could be done. But that has not been our tradition; our tradition is that each school develops the meaning of its own diploma.

Accountability

Ferrell: The big question now is what will happen to the students who failed the eleventh-grade tests last year. Most of those students have been placed in remedial programs. We don't know what will be the effect of those programs and how the students will score this fall. We have had very positive responses not only from teachers and administrators who are working with the students, but also from the students themselves. From the locally designed tests that have been given to students, we have the impression that there will be significant gains. If we are able to show gains, I think the legislature will put more money into programs of that nature. I think also that teachers are going to realize more and more that once you pinpoint a child's individual needs and work on treating those needs, you can be successful.

If the results are not good, we are going to have to reassess our position. But I'm not willing to accept the notion that there are children—other than those

who have an identified handicap—who cannot learn. I am not willing to write those children off.

Tyler: Accountability implies a contract, explicit or implicit. If I am a teacher, I am accountable for something. If I am a parent and I am bringing up children in the community, especially if I am a parent on welfare and the community supports me, I have an implied contract. I have some responsibilities for those children. The first step in any strategy in a genuine accountability program is to carry on discussion throughout the state and in the legislature about who is accountable for what. What can the school expect to do with different classes of children coming from different backgrounds? What can be done to strengthen the community so that it may be able to operate effectively in bringing up our children? If something like that is not done, the next generation will suffer. (NAEP Conference). [7]



Ron Brandt is Associate Director and Editor of Publications, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Washington, D.C.

Copyright © 1978 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.