

# EDITORIAL

## Will the Competency Movement Impede the Quest for Equity?

Ron Brandt

Everybody is in favor of equity—and quality too. Only when the two appear to be in conflict do we start choosing sides.

Ideally, we want them both. For example, a set of goals for ASCD proposed for consideration by the Board of Directors in March begins with the words, "The purpose of ASCD shall be to seek balanced instructional programs for assuring *equal* and *quality* educational opportunities for all students."

But what if greater equity means lesser quality—and higher standards bring inequality? Valora Washington writes in this issue about the potential inconsistency between desegregation and minimum competency testing. Howard Dunlap expresses concerns about effects of competency testing on slow learners.

Will the competency movement impede the quest for equity? That depends on how it works in practice. Those who favor competency testing say it will improve achievement by clarifying priorities, challenging students and teachers to do their best, and identifying those who need special attention. Opponents say that it will hurt those most in need of help by denying them the recognition of a diploma.

They point out that a single standard is bound to be too low to be meaningful for many students but too high to be fair to others. Setting minimum standards, they say, is reminiscent of traditional European education with its "exclusive" practices. But John W. Porter, Superintendent of Public Instruction for the state of Michigan, asserts that competency-based instruction (which is not necessarily the same as minimum competency testing) can change the school's role from "screening, sorting, and selecting" to one of providing "equity and excellence" for all students.<sup>1</sup>

The dilemma comes about because we are used to thinking about quality in comparative terms. We grade almost everything: eggs, res-

taurants, baseball players, students. The best are good because they are better than others. The competency movement may take that direction. Calls to "restore the meaning of the high school diploma" sometimes imply that diplomas would mean more if they were harder to get—and if fewer people had them.

Another view of quality, as noted in articles by Ernest Boyer and Dean Corrigan, is the one embodied in PL 94-142, which confirms the right of each student to a quality education. In this case, quality means programs appropriate for the individual leading to achievement of individual standards.

The move to define and develop student competencies is not an expression of a single coherent philosophy. Different people have different motives for pursuing it. Even if their intentions are similar, moreover, the results may be different from what they expect. In the short run, the competency movement may—in some states—actually reinforce the "sorting and selecting" approach to quality.

In the long run, however, American education is likely to continue in the tradition that has made it a model for other countries seeking to expand opportunities for their peoples. The tide of history is surely with those who view quality as it is defined in PL 94-142: maximum development of each individual.

<sup>1</sup> John W. Porter. "The Pros and Cons of the Competency Movement." Speech at the First Annual Conference on Student Competencies, San Francisco, December 1, 1978.



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