



Minimum Competency Testing and the Slow Learner

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Students with limited ability cannot be expected to achieve standards appropriate for those who are average and above.

Human intelligence spans a wide range of abilities from the severely retarded to the profoundly gifted. The general population is distributed within this continuum in a bell-shaped curve so that approximately half of the population bunches together in the middle with what is regarded as average intelligence, or IQ 90-110. A quarter of the population at the right on the curve constitutes the superior and gifted range of intelligence (IQ above 110), while the remaining quarter of the population at the left on the curve makes up the slow learner and retarded range (IQ below 90).

Students whose mental ability places them in the slow learner range (IQ 70-90) are—because of their limited ability—low achievers. Yet the general public (including the press, state legislators, and members of boards of education) in the current push for minimum competency testing for high school graduation seems largely unaware that no amount of testing, no setting of competencies, and no establishment of standards and remedial programs can cause these students to achieve beyond the limits of their intellectual capacity. Students with IQ's of 69 and below are classified as retarded and are provided appropriate

special education programs with individualized educational plans and individual achievement goals. It is accepted that the intelligence of these students limits their learning rate and the level of learning that can be expected from them. The general public, however, does not seem to realize that there is no sudden break between IQ 69 and IQ 70 regarding the student's ability to perform in school. Yet the child with IQ 69 is in a special education program where he/she finds realistic expectations for achievement and where special programs and resources are available, while the child with IQ 70 is in general education where he/she must compete with students of all other ability levels and meet standards established for the average child.

A Misunderstanding of the Term "Average"

The public expects that students not in special education should achieve at grade level or at the national average. They do not realize that, by definition of the word *average*, as many students must be below this mark as above it. Recent concern for "making a diploma mean something" and the current movement toward minimum competency graduation requirements will unfairly pe-

nalize all students in the 70-90 IQ range if standards for competency tests are set at grade level or at "average" achievement levels. It is not sufficient to say, "Well, just set the standards a little lower so they'll be fair to everybody." People need to understand just how low the standards will have to be if children with IQ's of 70-90 (who nationwide make up more than 20 percent of the total school population) are not to be trapped by the program we impose. People also need to realize that while suburban schools have a lower percentage of students in this ability range, rural and urban schools have a higher percentage.

The following table shows the learning expectancy by grade level for 14- and 17-year-olds (ordinarily ninth and twelfth graders) of varying ability levels:

Figure 1.¹

Age	Intelligence Quotient								
	70	75	80	85	90	95	100	105	110
14	4.8	5.5	6.2	6.9	7.6	8.3	9.0	9.7	10.4
17	6.8	7.7	8.6	9.5	10.3	11.2	12.0	12.8	13.7
	Grade Level								

When we place a child with IQ 70-90 in a general education program, we should be saying—if we are honest with the child and with ourselves—that this is a program appropriate to his/her needs, that he/she can in fact achieve successfully in this program, and that with diligence he/she can look forward to receiving a high school diploma. Yet the table above indicates that the student with IQ 70 at age 14 cannot be expected to perform above a high fourth-grade level and at age 17 cannot be expected to have reached more than a high sixth-grade level. If we are honest, we must award this student a diploma if he/she has been diligent enough to reach this level, or we must establish for that student a respectable (not a stigmatized) alternative exit route.

Earlier Testing and Other Alternatives

Recent court rulings regarding minimum competency graduation requirements indicate that students must be tested two or three years before graduation so they know what is required of them and so sufficient time will remain for them to

catch up. Follow-up testing in grade 11 or 12 on competencies not met at the ninth- or tenth-grade level must be equivalent to and no more difficult than the ninth- or tenth-grade testing. Therefore, the test items (and the reading level of the entire test) for any competency screening administered in the ninth grade to students with IQ's in the low 70's must not exceed the high fourth-grade level, since this is the highest level we can honestly expect them to have reached. Screening in the tenth grade could be at mid fifth-grade level, but would allow less time for remediation. In view of this, the public, boards of education, and members of state legislatures must accept one of the following alternatives:

1. Continue instruction without a minimum competency testing program;
2. Establish a minimum competency testing program with screening tests (and therefore graduation requirements) set no higher than the fifth-grade level;
3. Establish a minimum competency testing program with screening tests and graduation requirements set at a ninth- or tenth-grade level and be prepared to withhold the diploma from approximately 20 percent of the students (fewer in suburban schools, more in rural and urban schools);
4. Set the slow learner group of students apart (like the retarded group) with programs, requirements, and resources significantly different from those now available to them;
5. Institute a competency-based instructional program (not just a minimum competency testing program) that is truly individualized year-by-year for every student, with continuous records of teacher planning and student progress (this must not, however, be the ineffectual lip-service that has usually been paid to individualized instruction).

Certainly, the third alternative is unacceptable; we must not trap students in an instructional program and in graduation requirements that we say are appropriate for them but that we know will doom them to failure. The fourth alternative is equally undesirable; although individual teachers have sometimes been able to generate successful experiences with slow learner groups, lower track programs have generally been

unsuccessful. The three remaining choices indicate that we must do one of the following: continue whatever status quo exists and reject a minimum competency testing program; make our minimum competency standards realistically low for all students not in special education; or develop genuinely prescriptive instruction for all students, ensuring that each will have the opportunity to achieve to the maximum of his/her ability. If any one of these possibilities is accepted and if the public wants to know "what a diploma means," the public can ask for a copy of the student's transcript. If more immediate access to the student's record is desired, we can publish grades and test scores on the back of the diploma so that prospective employers may examine them and reach their own conclusions regarding the bearer's competence. We then would not need an arbitrary cut-off score that would withhold the diploma from those who, with least native endowment, have struggled hardest for what they have achieved. Neither these students nor society will be well served if we set them apart, prevent them from using the various coping skills they have developed, and keep them from being contributing members of society.

Overcoming Functional Illiteracy

The government-sponsored National Assessment of Educational Progress found in 1975 that 12 percent of 17-year-old high school students were functional illiterates; that is, reading and computing below a sixth-grade level. Yet, according to the learning-expectancy table presented earlier, students with IQ 70 are capable of achieving functional literacy by age 16 or 17. If we eliminate from this 12 percent the 2.5 percent of 17-year-olds in the retarded range, the National Assessment indicates that our schools have failed to achieve functional literacy with 9.5 percent of the students who have the capacity to reach that level. Perhaps a competency-based instructional program could help us (and slow learners) accomplish more. It would be foolish, however, not to recognize that the economic and social backgrounds of most of these students are powerful factors intervening to prevent optimum learning. If we consider the poverty, the cultural deprivation, and the persistent sense of failure that grows from year to year as these children

inevitably fall farther and farther behind children who have average and above-average ability, it may be that they and their teachers have been doing about as good a job as is possible for them to do. And even if redoubled effort from every source should bring this 9.5 percent of 17-year-olds to a functional level in reading and computation, it must be realized that they will almost certainly not reach a tenth- or twelfth-grade level.

A recent editorial in the *Macon Telegraph* (reprinted in the *Atlanta Journal* of October 17, 1978) concludes:

Finally, we greet the news that high school seniors will be expected to read like ninth graders and do math problems like eighth graders with mixed feelings.

Apparently, these levels will be higher than present Bibb County levels and the state minimum, so we're glad they're being raised.

However, a high school senior should be able to graduate doing both reading and math at the 12th grade level. Otherwise, what was the purpose of going to school beyond the eighth grade?

The answer is that some students aren't as bright as other students; they can't learn as fast. It is not that students who succeed have accepted responsibility and applied themselves while those who do poorly are the goof-offs. Slow learners are exactly what their designation implies; they need to go to school through the twelfth grade if, working as hard as possible, they are to reach even a seventh-, eighth-, or ninth-grade level. The American dream of equal opportunity for all does not mean equal outcome for all.

Perhaps in the past we have contributed to the failure of these students through our neglect, through our own failure to demand what they *can* achieve. But we must not swing to the other extreme, ensuring their failure by imposing standards that we know they cannot attain.



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