

tribute to their personal growth. A more constructive policy than releasing the recalcitrant into the secondary labor market would be to make the school program more interesting and effective. The choice is between providing less education or better education.

The authors also support a policy of work experience options wherein the student "stops out" or alternates between schooling and regular employment. But regular employment in the youth labor market may be worse than school; the contribution to personal development of part-time work has not been established. Educators should rather be involved in designing a curriculum of educational work experience in the community that is intentionally structured to enhance the intellectual and personal development of the student. The quality of the work experience needs to be monitored by someone concerned with the educational needs of the student.

The final policy recommendation to substitute competency-based certification for years of schooling is interesting and plausible, but also may not be any more just than the present system. When everyone is being assisted to achieve a common standard, the field of competition may simply shift to the amount of time required to achieve the standard, and those least able to delay their entry into the labor market may again take the longest to achieve the standard. Separating the screening or evaluative function from the more nurturant instructional function is certainly likely to improve the relationship between student and teacher, but it may also create considerable anxiety in the student who must take the

centrally administered examinations and may result in much teaching to the examination.

Perhaps the most pertinent policy implication of the data reported here is "to put it quite simply, if you want to make a difference in occupational status, it is better to exercise influence early" (p. 79). Bronfenbrenner (1978) would add that we must improve the conditions of parenthood "so that the family's magic power can be enhanced, so that its full potential can be realized" (p. 784).

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Response to Silberman

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Professor Silberman has done a good job of summarizing the findings and recommendations in our recent book, and we have only a few comments to offer in response. We too would like to see school programs become more interesting and effective, and we'd like to have the quality of parttime work experiences monitored by someone concerned with the educational needs of the stu-

dents (assuming it would not involve a cumbersome bureaucracy standing in the way of student jobs). Granting all that, we still share the view of Coleman's Panel on Youth that for many young people a better overall educational experience may involve spending a bit less time in formal classroom settings.

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versial matter is our recommendation of a de-emphasis on classroom grades coupled with the selective use of competency testing. Silberman worries that "those least able to delay their entry into the labor market may again take the longest to achieve the standard." Our own guess is that if we are talking about a minimal standard, if the standard is clear and reasonable (that is, not unnecessarily high), and if students are given early and multiple opportunities to achieve it, then the overwhelming majority of those who will ever be able to reach the standard will be able to do so before the age of 16.

The "competency testing movement"—particularly when it moves erratically in fits and starts—has considerable problems and risks. Two mentioned by Silberman are the potential for high levels of student anxiety and the problem that some teachers may "teach to the examination." We think that an enlightened approach to designing and administering competency tests can do much to overcome these problems.

An enlightened approach should recognize both the limitations of tests and their potential

strengths. On the limitations side, it should be clearly understood that "minimum competency"—and tests thereof—is not what most of education should be about. Most students are concerned with wider ranges and higher levels of competence than the minimum. On the other hand, there are many aspects of basic skills in such areas as reading and mathematics that can be measured reasonably well with group-administered standardized tests, and competency tests should be designed to provide a broad and detailed sampling of those domains.

Our own preference would be to see *very large* pools of test items developed and made available to the public without restriction. (This implies, of course, some source of public funding for the development and pretesting of these large item pools.) Such an approach would permit an almost limitless number of different test forms to be developed by taking controlled random samples of items from a given pool. The large number of different forms would, in turn, make it possible for students to take the tests frequently (perhaps as often as once a month) until they were able to master the material, overcome their anxiety, and so on.

Large pools of publicly available test items could be used by students and teachers as study aids, thereby making constructive use of any tendency to "teach to the examination." The trick here is to be sure that any such pool of test items (a) provides a broad sampling of the skills considered important, and (b) is sufficiently large to rule out rote memorization, thus requiring the students to learn the basic skills and principles.

Much more could be said about the importance of developing tests carefully, introducing the program early (not just in the last year or two of high school), and making sure that students, parents, and teachers, as well as school boards and legislators, are involved in setting up testing programs. Our purpose here is only to suggest that competency tests do not necessarily have to be a threat to students, teachers, or school administrators. They can, instead, provide some reasonable and relevant credentials, reduce the abuse of schooling and grades as credentials, improve student motivation and student-teacher relationships, and thus provide a constructive adjunct to our efforts to improve basic education.

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