

What Would Be Better?

What should we do instead? I have a few ideas but, unfortunately, no panaceas. If I had my way, I would give responsibility to local boards of education. If we do not like the performance of local boards of education, we can elect different people to them. It's the traditional way of taking care of elected officials we do not agree with.

The role of the teacher is absolutely essential to the improvement of education; our attention must be addressed to upgrading professional staff members, to providing inservice education, and to discovering novel ways of bolstering the activities of classroom teachers. Last, I would place strong emphasis on research to learn why a minority of teachers do not teach well and why a minority of students do not learn.

I would not want to be misunderstood. I am not suggesting a return to unrestricted local control of education, for I believe we would not have desegregation, equalization of school finance, or education of the handicapped if we did not have an aggressive role on the part of the federal government, the courts, and state governments. What I am arguing for is a proper division of responsibility among the levels of government with respect to education.

A Prediction

Since I really do not expect much attention to my modest but sensible suggestions, let me predict what is coming next. Suppose you were to hear that a state legislature enacted a law calling for a statewide required standard curriculum.

A resolution calling for a statewide curriculum was passed in the last session of the Loui-

siana legislature complete with "whereas's" and "wherefore's," referring to accountability, "attainment of a level of competency in the basic skills," and therefore to a need for statewide standards.

Efforts are being made in Louisiana to deal with the legislation in such a way as to make it more palatable. But other states may be next. It's the logical next step after minimum competency testing.

References

This presentation was based upon ideas developed and documented in the following publications by the author:

Legislated Learning: The Bureaucratization of the American Classroom. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979.

"Minimum Competency Testing: Another Case of Hyperrationalization." *Kappan* 59; May 1978.

"Why Educational Policies Often Fail: The Hyperrationalization Hypothesis." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 9; May 1977.

"On the Limits of Reforming the Schools Through Educational Measurement." *Cross Reference* 1; July-August 1978.

"The Hyperrationalization of American Education." *New York University Education Quarterly* 8; Summer 1977.

"Teacher: Automaton or Craftsperson?" *Trends, Processes and Prescriptions in Inservice Education.* Louis J. Rubin, editor. Boston: Allyn-Bacon, 1977.

"Minimum Educational Adequacy: Beyond School Finance Reform." *Journal of Educational Finance*, Spring 1976.



Arthur Wise is Senior Social Scientist, The Rand Corporation, Washington Office, Washington, D.C.

Competency Testing: A Response to Arthur Wise Warren B. Newman

Competency testing can provide helpful information to educators and the public.

Concerns about statewide competency testing programs are often based either on imperfections in the technology of measurement or philosophical questions about the appropriateness of

large-scale accountability assessment programs. For some strange reason, however, these concerns usually disappear when the unit of assessment moves from the state level to district, school, or



classroom levels. This is a curious phenomenon and suggests an essentially irrational basis for opposition to competency testing.

The emotional overlay of criticism clouds the picture rather than clarifying it. For example, sometimes the case against competency testing is predicated on the idea that because it may be politically motivated, it is evil at worst—and may be just another passing fad at best. Often the negative reaction is because it originated from a legislative body. Other “con” arguments are based upon a litany of negatives: not enough money is provided; the psychometric properties of a test are questionable; the content areas to be tested are considered priority areas at the expense of other curriculum subjects. Other types of arguments are based not so much on real or perceived operational flaws as on logical fallacies. For example, a negative stance that equates competency testing to competency-based education and either of those endeavors to state assessment programs per se, or program evaluation in general, does

monumental disservice to the profession. Obviously, they are different things.

Common Sense

I prefer a more common sense approach. We are a pluralistic society who have used public education to provide the skills and understandings to as wide a populace as possible in order that individuals may enter the mainstream most equitably and effectively. Public education serves a large constituency and is tax supported. It is necessarily a political endeavor.

Stated or not, understood or not, operationalized or not, education has goals that are national in scope. The need for an accountability system that assures society that education is meeting those goals is neither unusual nor unexpected.

If, then, common sense tells us that assessment of some sort will occur, it is not surprising that various levels of representative government will want their own assurances. The fact that competency testing may serve sociopolitical ends makes it no more or less purposeful than testing for the practioners' ends—whether that be for diagnosis or mastery.

Admittedly, there are some questions that can be raised about any testing program: What is the appropriate method of assessment for what unit? What about the sampling procedure? What about questions of validity? Reliability? Is the analysis appropriate? Do professional and lay personnel understand the causes and operations? These questions can be answered to one degree of satisfaction or another. There may indeed be reservations about the state of the art of measurement technology; however, it does not follow that because we have not reached perfection, we should decline to try to meet assessment requests.

As a profession, we should always be trying to improve and refine not only our curriculum



Warren B. Newman is Assistant Director, Office of the Los Angeles County Superintendent of Schools, Division of Program Evaluation, Research, and Pupil Services, Los Angeles, California.

base and instructional methodology, but our management techniques and accountability processes. Because program budgeting may not have been successful (was it ever implemented with the data processing support it required?), or because program evaluation is still the exception rather than the rule—except when required by categorical funding sources—should competency testing be damned? I think not.

What Competency Testing Can Be

Competency testing can be a means by which teachers and other support staff monitor the healthy development of students—socially, as

well as intellectually. It can be a way for managers to get better information in order to utilize their resources frugally and effectively, and for educators to communicate to their political constituencies their successes.

I guess this last point is at the heart of my concerns. We can describe a bottle filled half way as either half full or half empty. Maybe competency testing can help us to help others see that although not perfect, public education has been and is successful. But whether we take a positive or negative orientation to competency testing, I hope that we are logical in our professional thinking and honest with our social audiences.

Competency Testing: A Response to Arthur Wise

Chris Pipho

Educators should face the facts and make minimum competency programs work or they will lose public support.

Since the minimum competency testing movement started, Arthur Wise has been a spokesman for the viewpoint that legislative and state board mandates will not accomplish the purpose their authors intended. His assessment of the situation is supported by groups such as the National Education Association, many educators, and even some legislators. I agree with much of what he says, but agreement does not make for debate, and opposition without a better plan of action does not assist school districts and state departments who are under mandates to implement minimum competency testing.

The suggestion that the legislation represents hyperrationalization by state policy makers is intriguing. It leads me to ask at what point rationalization becomes hyper, or if one person's rationalization isn't another's hyperrationalization. Maybe, as with discussion of a played bridge hand or a conversation about the weather, it really doesn't matter.

An Accomplished Fact

We can speculate about the motive for minimum competency testing for years to come. It is a fact, however, that 36 states have taken either legislative or state board action to require or per-

mit schools to identify the minimum basic or life skills that students should attain as a result of moving through elementary and secondary school. This reality leaves only the implementation process open for debate. It is also fact that this action has, for the most part, been advocated by non-educators. Perhaps at no time in the history of American education have we ever had an idea adopted so quickly by so many states—an idea supported by noneducators and opposed by educators.

The notion that there is a struggle over the proper role for each level of government may surprise some people, but the struggle is real. As funds decrease, as the number of students decreases, and as demands for equal opportunity become more focused, the struggle will take on even more importance. Maybe this is a natural by-product of the adversary arrangements brought on by school finance court cases, equal educational opportunity litigation, and collective bargaining. The minimum competency testing issue raises basic questions—who controls public education and what should be taught?

Graduation Competencies

Wise implies that minimum competency testing is always tied to high school graduation.

Copyright © 1979 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.