

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.

That is defining the movement too narrowly. Only 17 states require a test before high school graduation. In the past 18 months no state has added this as their only requirement for minimum competency testing. Most policy makers today feel competency testing should be used throughout the system and that a test for high school graduation should be just the last step in a series of early warning alerts.

The idea that minimum competency testing will result in minimum expectations for students needs to be watched. At this time, there is no evidence to suggest that school districts that have withheld high school diplomas as a result of competency tests have dropped large numbers of courses or requirements for high school graduation. In fact, with the exception of the Florida and California early exit testing programs, none of the states has eliminated any Carnegie units or courses required for high school graduation.

Concern that minimum competency testing standards apply only to the three R's is perhaps a real one, but most of the legislators and state board members who have worked on this issue feel that the reading/writing/arithmetic mandate best describes the essential minimums of the education program. In fact, in many of the states, the mandate is much broader. Some of the additional topics include consumer economics, citizenship, survival skills, spelling, social studies, government and economics, everyday living skills, health and drugs, communications, social responsibility, career development, problem solving, reasoning, listening, history, free enterprise, and cultures of the U.S.

Political Mandates

Wise's concern that this is a political movement rather than an education movement is legitimate. I think his comparison of minimum competency testing to the accountability and management by objectives mandates that appeared several years ago is unwarranted. I have not found many legislators who introduced those earlier accountability mandates also responsible for the minimum competency mandates today. For the most part, those were large-scale approaches to improving *school systems*. While competency-based education uses a systems ap-

proach comparable to the accountability movement of ten years ago, minimum competency testing focuses on the *individual student*.

I agree with Wise that competency-based education is too comprehensive for the temper of the times. Minimum competency testing was conceived as a very simple idea. Too often educators want to give a more complicated solution than the public asked for. Parents are asking: Is my son or daughter performing up to grade level? What can I do? What can the schools do? Why can't students read and write when they receive a high school diploma?

The idea that the minimum competency testing movement is a tool to go after a small number of teachers who are not teaching or a small number of students who are not learning may be correct. Some legislators hold this viewpoint, but most of those who worked on the mandates did not see it that way. I agree with Wise that we have too much emphasis on test scores. It may even be correct to say that many people would be satisfied with information that does not include test scores.

Wise rejects competency testing primarily because it offers no new credible theory of education. I think this argument plays into the hands of the people making the demands. The idea that we cannot teach students how to read, write, and use arithmetic without a new theory of education would cause most politicians to react with words that could not be printed in any education publication.

Miscommunication

This may be the heart of the problem. Legislators and citizens thought we were teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic all along. They interpret concern about testing as opposition to the teaching of skills.

On the other hand, educators understand the day-to-day technical problems involved with setting minimum standards, writing test items, and using the results to improve instruction. People not familiar with these things can underestimate the problems associated with them.

Too often people on both sides assume their views to be so overwhelmingly correct that they have no need to listen to the views of others. The

ASCD Board Opposes Statewide Tests for Graduation, Favors Competency-Based Education

A statement opposing statewide minimum competency testing but favoring competency-based education was approved by the ASCD Board of Directors at the Annual Conference in Detroit in March. The statement says, "States should not require that students earn a given score on a statewide test in order to be promoted or graduated. States which have such programs should amend them to provide for control by local districts."

The paper also recommends that depending on the existing situation, "it may be appropriate for states to require that local districts establish standards for what all students are expected to learn, and test students periodically to measure their progress in relation to the standards."

The position paper is based on a longer report prepared in 1978 by an ASCD committee chaired by Owen Henson of the Topeka, Kansas, Public Schools. ASCD's position paper says one reason that states should be wary of tests for high school graduation is that no one knows what minimum standards ought to be. It adds that testing in and of itself will do very little to improve achievement.

The new statement will be used by ASCD as the basis for communicating with state educational policy-makers. It recommends that if states encourage school districts to establish competency-based education programs:

1. Students should not be expected to meet a given standard all at the same time. Those who learn more slowly should not be penalized.
2. Testing related to standards for graduation should be conducted early enough so that students have time to learn what they need to learn.
3. Students should not be permitted to graduate solely because they can pass tests of basic skills, because they need a balanced education.

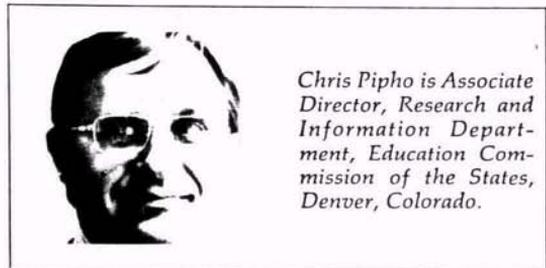
To obtain a copy of the Board-approved statement, send your request with an ordinary stamped, self-addressed envelope to: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 225 N. Washington Street, Alexandria, Virginia 22314.

struggle quickly reaches the stage at which the person on the street is able to score as many points as the nationally known researcher. Both sides became more interested in winning the argument than in trying to compromise or build a good instructional program. It is not so much a matter of hyper-rationalization as it is hyper-reaction—hyperreaction by the extreme elements on both sides.

What's Ahead

Where is the movement going? By now every local district must have heard of minimum competency testing. Many schools, teachers, administrators, and local boards of education are starting programs with or without state mandates. Some efforts will be well done, but others will display little common sense or technical expertise. The inept activities worry me the most. Many college and university programs have not prepared teachers and administrators to design and implement competency-based programs. In fact, much of the postsecondary effort is still being directed at killing the movement. The inept activities will probably do much to support the public view that we really didn't know how to do a good job teaching the basic skills. This could give impetus to demands for teacher competency testing, voucher programs, and maybe even voucher programs with a minimum competency guarantee.

The debate is over. The issue is much larger than minimum competency testing. The issue really is public education—who controls it, what will the teachers teach, and what can we expect the students to learn? While the problems seem immense, public support and expectations are high on this issue. What we do will help win public support or lose it. I plead for less hyper-reaction and more common sense.



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