

Why Minimum Competency Testing Will Not Improve Education*

Arthur Wise



Minimum competency testing is not so much an educational movement as it is a power struggle. State legislatures will be the winners; teachers and poor students the losers.

The search for the right role for each level of government causes me to question statewide "minimum competency testing." I look upon it as a *political* movement and try to understand its nature. I notice that for the last 10 years or so, state legislatures have been trying to get a handle on education. There have been numerous innovations during that period, all proposed as ways to improve education. Let me remind you of some of them: accountability; planning, programming, budgeting systems; management by objectives; operations analysis; systems analysis; program evaluation and review technique; management science; planning; cost-effectiveness studies; systems engineering; zero-based budgeting. There are two characteristics of items in this list. They are all systems approaches, devised elsewhere and brought to education. And they are not just ideas being developed; every one of them is embodied in state law in one or more states.

There is another list that goes along with the previous one. It starts with competency-based education and includes performance-based education, competency-based teacher education, competency-based teacher certification, statewide assessment, program evaluation, learner verification, behavioral objectives, and criterion-referenced testing. Again, these are not just schemes being developed; every one of them is also required by law in one or more states. And they are all variations of the same systems approach.

In historical sequence, what came first was "accountability." What came next was "competency-based education." We are currently caught up in "minimum competency testing." Later on, I will mention what may be next.

The generalized notion of accountability evolved into competency-based education because accountability did not have a sufficient technology to be usable. Competency-based education seems to provide the needed technological base and pur-

* Adapted from a speech presented at the National Conference on Student Competencies, San Francisco, November 30-December 1, 1978.

ports to accommodate all the goals of education—all the goals, not just reading, writing, and arithmetic. And therein lies one of the central problems: it is too comprehensive for the temper of the times.

We have moved instead to minimum competency testing for two reasons. First, because this is state level activity, there needs to be a statewide consensus on the objectives. Second, the objectives must be measurable—there must be tests available. Well, there is a general consensus that it is important to teach people how to read and do arithmetic, and reading and arithmetic tests have been around for a long time.

Related Developments

Associated developments at the federal level and in the courts reinforce minimum competency testing. I will cite just two examples. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act channels additional resources to children from low-income families. It is salutary that we have recognized our serious underinvestment in this group of children. Notice, however, that we have been led to judge effectiveness of Title I by the extent to which it increases reading and arithmetic test scores.

My second example is a lawsuit in the state of New Jersey, *Robinson v. Cahill*, which had a curious history. It began some six or seven years ago as one of the school finance reform lawsuits, the purpose of which was to equalize educational resources. Several years later it emerged in quite a different form. In the end, the court called for "thorough and efficient education," which is similar in some ways to what other states call minimum competency testing. As people have become embroiled in the effort to understand the arcane terms of "thorough and efficient education," school finance equalization has not occurred. The point is that we have become obsessed with measuring the results of education and much less concerned with improving the quality of education.

Why Competency Testing?

Minimum competency testing is expected by its advocates to solve two problems. One problem can be solved easily; the other cannot. The first is the alleged devaluation of the high school diploma. Minimum competency testing can restore the value of the high school diploma. It can divide



all students into two categories—those who can pass the test and those who cannot. The second problem is a far more important one. It is that a minority of the students are not learning, and a minority of teachers are not teaching. There is little reason to think that minimum competency testing will solve that.

Minimum competency testing is based on five assumptions, all of which are questionable. One is that operationalizing the goals of education will facilitate their attainment. I know of no research that supports that assumption. The second is that measuring the outcomes of education improves learning. That is probably unprovable.

A third assumption is that if you generate lots of information via test scores, you can act on the information. That is, by comparing school districts, schools, teachers, and children, you can derive information that is pedagogically relevant. Again, I have not seen many examples of pedagogically relevant information being fed back in a timely and useful fashion to teachers.

The fourth assumption is that teachers are like automatons—programmable persons capable of reconstituting their behavior at the behest of legislative fiat. That seems to me a very curious notion. The fifth assumption is that there is a science of education that is not being practiced, but that will be if educators are forced to pay attention to test scores. I know of no such science.

Hyperrationalization

I reject minimum competency testing primarily because it offers no credible theory of education; it is another fad. I distinguish between rationalization and hyperrationalization. Rationalization is sensible. You try to make sure the activities you engage in will get you to the results you want or that the results that you have chosen are attainable given the activities and resources you have. Hyperrationalization is when you engage in apparent rationalization, but there is no basis for thinking that you are really improving the connection between activities and outcome.

What are the effects of all this? We are moving toward an increased centralization of education in this country, and that has some unfortunate consequences. In the first place, centralization leads to further bureaucratization of schools. The most visible result of minimum competency testing will be having people in school systems who are not teachers but who are implementers of minimum competency testing. They will have counterparts in the state departments of education. It is inevitable that when you run things from afar, you institute control mechanisms, including measurement devices. Schools will be pushed to reduce their aspirations for education—to pursue only those goals that are measurable.

A Power Struggle

I believe there is a power struggle going on, although the parties do not think of it in these terms. Minimum competency testing is coming largely from state legislatures—from the same people who are bringing us fiscal conservatism, “back-to-the-basics,” and “less government is better government.” Who are the winners and losers in the power struggle? One of the winners is the state legislature, which enhances its control

over the school system at the expense of other agencies.

State boards of education, for the most part, have not been prominent in the minimum competency testing movement; their role has been overshadowed by the state legislatures, which have usurped the functions state boards of education are supposed to perform. Among the winners are state departments of education, because they get important new assignments to carry out. People who work in state departments of education tend to feel good about minimum competency testing. Other losers are the local school boards, whose members used to think it was their job to define the goals of education.

Local administrators are ambivalent. On the one hand, they have new responsibilities—to implement state directives. They also have a handle on the classroom teacher, which some administrators have wanted for a long time. On the other hand, they are subject to external constraints. I don’t know whether administrators are winners or losers in the redistribution of power.

Big losers are teachers, because they lose whatever modicum of professional discretion that yet remains to them. Minimum competency testing, like competency-based education, is designed to make the teacher a better bureaucrat. The professionalism of the teacher role is exchanged for the bureaucratic conception of the teacher role.

That brings us to children. It seems to me that children fall into three categories: good students, average students, and poor students. How does minimum competency testing treat good and average students? The competency requirements are going to have to be set pretty low. In fact, the tests will have to be designed so that most kids can get by pretty easily. Thus, the expectations are not even relevant to average and good students; yet we are redesigning the entire educational system for all children.

Poor students are the biggest losers. There will be three groups of 20-year-olds soon. There will be those who have a grade A high school diploma; they will be all right. There will be high school dropouts, and there will be the people with the grade B school completion certificate. I would like to see how the job market will discriminate between those people who are high school dropouts and those who are *certified incompetents*.

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 Louisi-

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

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