A battle over testing has erupted in New Jersey, where the State Department of Education has publicly identified schools with persistent low achievement. In this issue, Norman Goldman and William Shine complain that their state's testing program wastes time and money and that low scores are the result of social conditions schools cannot correct by themselves. New Jersey Commissioner Fred Burke replies that the Department bases its disapproval on more than test scores, and that some schools manage to teach well despite their students' low socioeconomic level. To broaden the argument, we include comments made by Henry Brickell in an address to staff members of regional service agencies charged with helping the unsuccessful schools improve. With tongue in cheek but nevertheless in earnest, Brickell suggests some drastic ways to change ineffective schools. He also lists ways to change schools that he says won't work—most of which are the current daily pursuits of the regional units, and of many ASCD members.

As legislators and others begin to suspect that student deficiencies are caused by teacher incompetence, the minimum skills searchlight is beginning to focus on teachers as well as students. Walter Hathaway, who helped develop a student competency testing program for the Portland, Oregon, schools has turned his attention to teacher testing. He concludes that tests by themselves will not ensure competency, but that they can be a useful part of a teacher selection and induction program.

That seems reasonable; tests can't do everything, but they can screen out the unqualified and that's useful in itself. Arguing that testing will not ensure competency is like saying that electric appliances meeting Underwriters Laboratories standards may not work very well. Of course minimum standards don't guarantee excellence, but they serve a purpose nonetheless.

The issue is muddled by misuse of the word "competency." I don't know how it was wed to "minimum"; probably it was in connection with Oregon's ambitious graduation requirements adopted in the early 1970s. Current usage of those terms is unfortunate because competency implies a lot more than minimal mastery of basic skills. Both are desirable—but tests are more suitable for one than the other.

As to standards, they raise troublesome questions when applied to elementary and secondary schools that serve an entire population, but they are clearly necessary for a profession.

It's ironic there should be any question about the literacy of teachers. In an enlightened society, the education of future generations should be entrusted only to unusually capable people, and teaching should be a highly respected profession.

Nevertheless, in the world we live in, school teaching is regarded by many as a second-class occupation. Fewer parents now encourage their children to become educators, and most gifted young people choose other careers.

Under the circumstances, we should take every precaution to ensure that prospective teachers have mastered the basic skills and the subject or subjects they expect to teach.

On the other hand, some aspects of teacher competency can be assessed only by professional judgment, and that requires an adequate supervision and teacher evaluation program. Should teachers be tested? Yes. But not for professional knowledge and skills; developing competency is the role of the supervisor.

Editor's note: Readers' comments on our articles are welcome. Address letters to Editor, Educational Leadership, 225 No. Washington St., Alexandria, Virginia 22314. Letters accepted for publication may be edited for brevity and clarity.