More and more states are requiring tests for teacher certification, but testing alone will not ensure competency.

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In the 1970s at least two-thirds of the states and some local districts responded to citizen alarm over declining test scores and reports of illiterate graduates by requiring elementary and secondary students to pass minimum competency tests. As we enter the 1980s, a growing number of state legislatures and state and local school systems are turning to tests for teachers as the next logical step in their efforts to raise achievement.

Setting standards for teachers and students, and gathering evidence about whether standards have been met, is not new to education. Similar practices were common in China 5,000 years ago and in America before the Civil War. However, the current push for standards is remarkable in two respects: first, the haste with which many people have become convinced of an epidemic of incompetence among teachers; and, second, the rush to use tests to solve the problem. Not surprisingly, there is strong disagreement and debate within the American education community over whether tests are a worthwhile or necessary means of ensuring teacher competency.

Jack Bloomfield, examiner in charge of Research and Development for the New York City Board of Examiners, forcefully stated the case for testing:

... We cannot afford to allow inadequately-trained beginning teachers to learn to teach at children's expense. The students in our urban schools are increasingly underprivileged economically and socially.

They should have the most highly qualified teachers available.

School systems should use the most advanced techniques for staff selection. Their assessment of potential teachers should be based on thorough, unbiased job analyses and should provide equal employment opportunity along with a strong due process component. We must screen out those applicants who are not able to communicate orally or in writing with clarity and correctness. Since all colleges do not have the same standards, additional evaluation of content and teaching mastery must be required by school systems for teaching licenses.

Governor George Bushee of Alabama demonstrated how strongly a politician can favor tests for teachers:

We have realized that we will never have quality education unless we have quality teachers. We also recognize the fact that we cannot have quality teachers without quality pay to attract new teachers and keep them more than three or four years. But I submit to you that unless we have adequate assessment of the quality of teachers entering the system and require all teachers to both pass the criterion-referenced test and satisfactorily demonstrate good teaching skills on the job... we will have failed.

A recent editorial in The Washington Post gave the argument for testing teachers from the public's point of view:

In the District [Washington, D.C.], public school teachers have been hired for years on the basis of their college records and interviews. Most are graduates of [a local] teacher's college, which in 1977 permitted two students to graduate even though they had failed basic math courses. One of the graduates could not add fractions such as 3/4 plus 1/3. Faculty members said incompetent students had been slipping through [the college] and going on to teach in the city's public schools for 10 years.

Something must be done now before children are made mental cripples. [The] Superintendent is considering a requirement to have new teachers pass a test of academic skills... He should. The time to put it into effect is in 1980, when the system hopes to begin citywide testing of
Teachers

Students before promotions from grades 3, 6, and 9. It is no less important to begin testing senior teachers. . . . Testing of old teachers as well as new ones, is the way for the school system to get to the heart of its academic woes. 8

An early advocate of tests, at least for licensing entering teachers, was American Federation of Teachers President Albert Shanker. He said, "In our state, you have to take an examination to become a lawyer, and to get a driver's license, and to sell insurance. Exempting teachers from such a requirement is a form of de-professionalization." 4

AFT support for testing teachers has not, however, been extended to include testing veteran teachers. Shanker has gone on record opposing such tests:

Many state and local school districts have welcomed the current focus on accountability because it gives them grounds for criticizing or even firing teachers—particularly the more expensive ones. Since there is no research to tell us which competencies are valid, the selection of which competencies are to be required could change from year to year, depending on the political wishes and financial circumstances of the states and local school boards. What all of this ignores is the complexity of factors that contribute to student growth. It also ignores the need for teaching to be viewed as a process involving abilities of diagnosis, analysis and understanding, as well as the performance of isolated skills.

Mary Bergen of the California Federation of Teachers has argued similarly that in the case of challenges to the competency of practicing teachers, "Incompetence really is not usually the issue. The issue usually is a person who rocked the boat." 5

The National Education Association has opposed testing both teachers and teacher candidates. John Ryor, then President of NEA, told the association's 1978 annual meeting that existing state certification laws and the tenure period are sufficient tools for rooting out incompetency. John Sullivan, NEA's Director of Instruction and Professional Development, further enunciated the association's position: "There is no test conceived that would be helpful in determining whether teachers should continue to teach." Sullivan has allowed, however, that it might be acceptable to use short essay tests (but not standardized tests) to screen out those teacher candidates least competent in language skills. 6

Robert Cole eloquently rejected minimum competency testing for both prospective and practicing teachers when he wrote:

Minimum competency testing is a hollow means of judging the efficacy of teachers. It can only whittle away at the edges of the problem; it has no power to cure, because it treats symptoms rather than causes. The heart of the problem perceived by the public lies deep within the structure of the education system . . . competency testing is nothing more than search for victims, off on a false scent. The time for assurances of competence is at the beginning of the [teacher] educative process, not simply as a belated quality check at the end. It is within our power as a professional community, for example, to redesign teacher training in a way that takes advantage of valuable research findings. It is within our power to change traditional reward systems so as to attract a higher quality of teachers. Rational planning based on solid research and clear goals can effect constructive change. Hastily conceived tests of minimum competence will only add to existing confusion. 7

State and Local Experiences with Testing Teachers

Proposals for when to test teachers have ranged from the point of selection of candidates applying to and graduating from teacher training institutions to on-the-job evaluation of experienced teachers. The current movement has focused most intensely on teacher certification at the state level and, in local districts, on screening applicants for teaching positions. There has also been some emphasis at the local level on using tests to identify weaknesses of probationary or even experienced teachers for purposes of remediation or dismissal.

A total of 15 states require some form of teacher competency testing as a condition of certification, and six other states are actively considering adoption of such a program. Florida got the movement rolling in 1978 when the legislature passed a bill requiring candidates to pass a written examination as a prerequisite for certification. It also required passage of a nationally normed college entrance exam before teacher training and a year-long internship. Prior to this, three states—Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina—had been using National Teacher Examination (NTE) results for teacher certification. The teacher testing movement gained momentum following the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in January 1978 that South Carolina did not discriminate against Blacks by using the National Teacher Examination to certify teachers.

Louisiana also began using the NTE for certification in order to meet a legislative requirement that teachers pass a test as a condition of certification. West Virginia began using the NTE for certification in 1979 and Tennessee adopted it effective this year. Besides the six states already using the NTE for certification, Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, Virginia, Arizona, Iowa, Oklahoma, and New York have new laws requiring that beginning teachers pass tests to be certified. Similar legislation is being considered in six other states. Specific provisions of the laws vary from state to state.

New York
includes completion of a one-year internship. Oklahoma added a requirement that education professors teach school for a half-day each week for one semester every few years. Georgia has developed a comprehensive set of instruments for assessing teacher performance (see p. 219).

Applicant failure rates on the various forms of state examinations have ranged from 20 percent in Georgia to 47 percent in Louisiana. Some who failed the tests may have moved to states that do not have such requirements and are now teaching there.

Local districts, too, are developing more discerning methods for evaluating teachers. The New York City School System has been employing examinations as an integral part of its teacher and supervisor selection and appointment process for over 80 years. Through its Board of Examiners, New York has created over 1,000 different license and certificate examinations for educators. All teaching positions are filled only upon successful completion of an appropriate examination that is partially written.

In 1978, New York’s School Personnel Assessment Council surveyed 62 large city school systems to see what they were doing in the areas of teacher and supervisor testing, certification, licensing, and selection. Of the 54 returns, approximately one-third indicated that they gave examinations as part of their teacher selection process.

Since August 1976, Pinellas County, Florida, has used below-criterion score performance on tests as a sufficient reason to disqualify teacher applicants from further consideration (see p. 217). Approximately 30 percent of the applicants fail the test when it is first given each year.

Like Pinellas County, the Torrington, Connecticut, school system has been testing prospective teachers since 1976. In order to be hired, this year’s applicants must take and pass an essay of 200 to 500 words on an educational topic, a 100-word spelling test, and a 20-sentence grammar test. The essays are graded for meaning and imagination, as well as for grammar, spelling, and punctuation. The scores on this battery of tests are used as one of many factors in hiring decisions.

The Mobile, Alabama, School Dis-
trict recently adopted a requirement that all teacher applicants pass the NTE. It revised its teacher evaluation system to include a requirement that any teacher found making grammatical errors would have to submit an essay to the superintendent for evaluation. When it further attempted to require that all current teachers take the NTE, the board backed down under pressure from the teachers.

In the Prince George's County, Maryland, School District, the teachers union was involved in efforts to keep incompetents out of the classroom. As a result, pre-employment tests began in June 1975 in the areas of spelling and grammar, and a mathematics test was added in 1977. The tests have screened out approximately 20 percent of the applicants.

In Emporia, Kansas, the school board has started to implement a new program requiring each teacher applicant who reaches the interview stage to demonstrate English proficiency by writing a 250-word letter to a parent on one of six subjects. The test takes an hour and is graded 10 percent on content and 90 percent on mechanics.

In Montgomery County, Maryland, prospective English teachers must obtain a score of at least 80 on a test designed for college students. In Richmond, Virginia, all elementary teachers were required to pass a course in reading before they could get pay increases. And New York City and Buffalo have used the NTE in hiring teachers for schools having large numbers of children with reading problems. Chicago has also developed a teacher testing program.

The Salem, Oregon, school system has reaped considerable political capital with their local community and much favorable attention among citizens statewide by requiring teacher candidates to get at least 23 out of 44 items correct on a locally developed test of competence in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, word usage, sentence construction, and the ability to detect student errors in composition. This program eliminates about 5 percent of the candidates from further consideration when their scores fall below criterion level. As with Pinellas County, there is evidence in Salem that the existence of the test as part of the hiring procedure is causing some candidates to apply elsewhere.

As with the student competency movement, state and local school systems are moving rapidly ahead with policies and procedures to implement teacher testing systems, largely without the benefit of a carefully designed and researched experimental pilot program or even a systematic evaluation of the varying approaches being tried. Clearly, for some, the case for using tests is strengthened by the failure of existing evaluation and certification agencies and procedures to rid our schools of incompetents.

Inadequacy of Existing Procedures

We continue to find incompetent teachers in our children's classrooms because: (1) at least some of those attracted to the teaching profession and to schools of education are of low or marginal ability; (2) the standards for gaining admission to and graduation from even accredited teacher preparation institutions are sometimes too low or too poorly applied to weed out incompetents; (3) state certification and district selection processes also sometimes fail to identify the incompetents and keep them out of the classroom; and (4) some teacher evaluation procedures seem inadequate for identifying incompetent teachers and removing them from the classroom, even during their probationary period and certainly not once they have tenure.

Tests, with their clarity, objectivity, and externality of control, are viewed as the only means to cut into this cycle of failure to ensure acceptable levels of teaching competency.

The level of academic talent among those seeking and gaining admission to schools of education is lower than for any other field of study and is steadily decreasing as the more able potential applicants move to greener fields. The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores of college-bound high school seniors planning to major in education in 1976 were below average by 34 points in the verbal area and 43 points in math. Out of 19 fields of study reported by the American College Testing Program (ACT) for enrolled first-year students in 1975-76, education majors tied for 17th place in math and 14th place in English. Both SAT and ACT results show more rapid declines for those studying education than for other fields, especially math. In 1976, among graduating college seniors in the National Longitudinal Study, education majors ranked 14th out of 16 fields on SAT verbal scores. Only office-clerical and vocational-technical graduates were lower. Thus, the evidence for the low and declining basic skills competence of those gaining admittance to colleges of education is unquestionable.

The role played by schools of education is also coming under scrutiny. The Graduate Record Exam verbal and nonverbal test scores among education majors have declined significantly since 1970. Scores of teaching majors were substantially lower than scores of majors in eight other professional fields compared in 1975-76. And teacher scores have fallen at a faster rate than overall GRE scores since 1970. Thus, there is little doubt that graduation from a teaching preparation program, even an accredited one, is no guarantee of a potential teacher's competency to teach.

It is the proper role of the agencies that grant or withhold accreditation to teacher preparation institutions to ensure sufficiently high levels of standards and performance. Unfortunately, the teaching profession finds itself in a situation analogous to that of the medical profession more than 100 years ago. In the early 1800s a graduate of a "chartered" medical school could qualify for a license to practice medicine in most states. Since such charters were easy to come by there was a proliferation of medical schools offering the lowest quality of education and freely granting debased degrees. In 1847, the American Medical Association was formed, chiefly to deal with this situation. But it was not until almost 1900 that most states had established state examining boards. In 1910, the Flexner Report on the quality of medical education was issued; within five years, 40 percent of all medical schools had closed their shabby doors. While I do not recommend a wholesale closing of teacher preparation institutions, there is evidence that the average ability of those entering such institutions is on the decline and that some teacher candidates have received diplomas from accredited schools of education without having gained or demonstrated even minimal levels of basic skills and teaching competency. In most states, until recently, mere possession of a teaching diploma from such an accredited institution was a passport to...
for employment. Effective selection personnel since personnel manage "unnecessary" administrative jobs beyond commonly falls on the principal who may be unable or unwilling to recognize and deal with teaching incompetence. The "I'm OK, you're OK" ethic does not support outright challenges to another professional's competence, especially when it probably means the end of a career in which at least five years and thousands of dollars have been invested. Finally, a maze of contract provisions, state and local regulations, and legal considerations render the effort to dismiss an incompetent teacher, once hired, very difficult and time consuming.

Limitations and Issues

What to Test? The Austin School District's experience with testing teachers encapsulates the problems and concerns that those embarking on such an effort must be prepared to overcome. Austin tried testing a segment of their teachers as part of a board-directed exploration of tests for both teacher candidates and practicing teachers. The district finally decided not to use such tests because of the small fraction of teacher competencies that could be adequately measured by tests, the large cost of developing valid and legally defensible measures, and the threatened negative impact on district recruitment and hiring efforts. Instead of tests, therefore, Austin developed a more rigorous and formal competency-based evaluation system.

Other school districts, such as Salt Lake City, who have carefully considered testing teachers, have chosen a course of action similar to Austin's. The basic problem is that there is no set of teacher competencies that have been empirically validated by research as essential for effective learning to take place.11

How to Test? Let us assume that a state or district, ignoring rigorous empiricism and attending to the desire of its community, proceeds to identify a set of competencies it believes are essential for effective teaching and learning. Such a list would be likely to include competencies in basic skills and other subjects to be taught, instructional skills, classroom management skills, interpersonal skills, and personal qualities. After a lengthy process that included attention to the relevant research, Austin, for example, came up with a list of 63 competencies spanning these areas. The problem now becomes one of valid assessment for such a set of competencies. David Seeley summarized this limitation when he wrote:

"The burden for evaluating teachers... commonly falls on the principal who may be unable or unwilling to recognize and deal with teaching incompetence."

The main problem is that no one has come up with a test that can predict who will make a good teacher—or good principal, for that matter. No one would be happier than I if one could be found; it would make life much simpler. But at the moment, the most that tests can be expected to do is screen out those whose general educational background is too weak, or those teachers who don't know their subject matter well enough to teach it. Once you get beyond these minimal uses of tests, there is no escape from the need for human judgment followed by very careful monitoring of performance.12

If we take Seeley's advice, as some have, and limit our tests of teacher competency to subject matter examinations, we will not solve the problem of incompetence. In the NSBA survey cited earlier, one superintendent divided incompetent teachers into two groups: "Those who don't have it" (who lack teaching skills) and "those who don't use it" (who are able, but don't give adequate effort).

Others in the NSBA survey generally grouped incompetent teachers into these categories:

- New teachers who lack the temperament, patience, and compatibility both to get along with young people and to plan effective teaching. Also included in this category are some new teachers who are inadequately prepared to teach, who lack basic skills, and who are, in the words of one educator, "real lulu's."
- Mass hirers who were employed during the periods when teachers were in short supply. "Now," said one Texas superintendent, "we face the problem of removing some of them to make room for some of the highly skilled practitioners coming out of colleges."
- The emotionally troubled, whose problems may be rooted in home or professional areas.
- Veterans who cannot keep up—who may be experiencing a late career slump or who have lost their drive, interest, and adaptability or who have trouble handling newer instructional programs or different student bodies.13

The same report notes that legal judgments of teacher incompetence have been based upon such things as insubordination, unpatriotism, poor health, lack of self control, poor student learning, negligence, and absenteeism. It is obvious that the problem of "incompetence" among teachers is too broad to be handled adequately by testing them for minimal knowledge of basic skills.

Del Schalock, in his indepth review of research on teacher selection, made the devastating point that even
if we limit our targets for teacher competency testing to knowledge of basic skills, other subject matter, and the principles and procedures of teaching, and even if we use a measure carefully developed by a major education testing institution, we still have no guarantee of improving teaching. He observed, after a comprehensive review of relevant studies, that "Without exception . . . scores derived through the National Teacher Examination and performance as a teacher . . . [were] found to be unrelated."\(^1\)

**Legal Issues.** The final issues that need to be carefully addressed are the legal ones. Aside from having to comply with all other state and federal constitutional and regulatory requirements, as well as with local laws, regulations, and contracts, teacher selection procedures must comply with the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment: any written examination must be directly related to the job of teaching. In view of the previously cited birth of empirical evidence on the predictive validity of supposed essential teacher competencies, this validation could be difficult to establish. Robert Thorndike was cited by Paul Trachtenberg, however, as being of the opinion that a demonstration of content validity would most likely be sufficient to survive legal challenge on due process grounds.\(^5\)

A potentially even more troublesome legal issue is that in order to comply with the equal protection clause of the Constitution and the provisions of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, a test must not discriminate either directly or indirectly on the basis of race, religion, national origin, or sex. Title VII of that act is a possible basis for legal actions against teacher competency tests used in selection processes, according to Trachtenberg, since:

Under this statute, a requirement for employment which has the effect of excluding racial minorities is legal only if it is necessary for performance on the job. Where written tests are involved, the courts give considerable weight to guidelines developed by the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). These guidelines specify acceptable methods by which employers can validate tests. . . . Once the plaintiffs have proved that tests have the effect of disproportionately screening out minority applicants, the defendant has the burden of justifying its use of the tests. However, where plaintiffs have shown a racially disproportionate effect from use of a test, the defendants have virtually always failed to justify their reliance on test scores. In order to do so, they must prove that the tests have "validity." Although the EEOC guidelines seem to require predictive validity, they have not been applied rigorously by the agency itself, nor by the courts. In most instances . . . the tests in question have been lacking in content validity. In other cases the defendants used the tests improperly.\(^16\)

In the absence of a body of research establishing the validity of tests in teacher competency, those seeking to put such programs into effect must do their own careful validation studies in accord with the EEOC guidelines or be prepared to suffer the legal consequences.

I s testing teachers to ensure minimally acceptable levels of the basic skills and perhaps of instructional skills the answer to the quest for better teaching and learning? The answer is, of course, "By itself, no." In isolation it is only a bandage for a symptom rather than a guaranteed cure. We cannot, however, afford to sit idly by, arguing that incompetence among teachers is no worse than in other professions. An aroused public will not permit it even if our consciences would.

Testing teachers for basic skills competence is not the whole answer, but as part of a comprehensive program to apply what careful evaluation and research have already taught us, it will lead to better schooling. Testing can be part of the solution—if it is linked with efforts to attract the best and most creative people to the teaching profession; if it is aided by improved accreditation standards and practices; if teacher preparation institutions carefully screen those who come to their doors and then prepare them with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for caring, professional, creative teaching; if state departments guarantee that a certificate to teach is granted only to the truly qualified; if school districts select, evaluate, and support the growth of their teachers so they may continue to meet lofty and scientifically proven standards of the teaching profession; if tests are developed in collaboration with the teachers themselves and those who represent them; if testing is integrated with efforts to improve the competence of all administrative and support personnel; if it is backed by efforts to honor the responsibilities of students, parents, and citizens as partners in the teaching-learning enterprise; if it is allowed to affect teachers and their careers only after careful and prolonged experimentation, evaluation, validation, and legal review; and if, finally, it is supported by a nationwide program of continuous research and evaluation to ensure its efficacy and continuous improvement. Then and only then will testing teachers to ensure their competency make a worthwhile contribution to the attainment of our common commitment to excellence in American education.

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4 *Education USA* (12 November 1979): 85.
9 Ibid.
10 Daniel B. Hogan, "Is Licensing Public Protection or Professional Protectionism?" *New Directions in Experimental Learning*, p. 3.
13 American School Board Association, p. 10.