

...And in Pinellas County

THOMAS S. TOCCO AND JANE K. ELLIGETT

The Pinellas County teacher applicant testing program was begun in 1976. Its purpose was to ensure that all newly hired elementary teachers could meet minimum standards. Since 1976 it has been expanded to include all teacher applicants.

The early publicity surrounding the teacher testing program was set off by release of the results of our first small pilot study in April 1976. Of 15 applicants tested, eight failed to meet advanced eighth grade standards in reading comprehension or an approximate sixth grade level in arithmetic. No claim was made as to the representativeness of this small group of 15, although all of them were certified and all of them had been screened for university and personal credentials. The fact that every one of these applicants would have been eligible without the screening test dramatized the necessity of a formal demonstration of competencies rather than assuming that certification guaranteed their existence.

The screening program is *not* intended to replace professional hiring judgment with competitive examinations. It does *not* equate academic proficiency with teaching skill. It is simply a program to ensure that new teachers actually possess the rudiments of reading comprehension and elementary arithmetic. The underlying philosophy of the program is that

a minimal competency in these skills is essential in order that other necessary teaching competencies can come to fruition.

The internal consistency reliabilities of the two arithmetic tests used in the program are .87 and .84. The five reading tests have reliability coefficients which range from .85 to .94. All tests have been extensively examined for content validity either by outside consultants or by the tests' publishers. All teacher tests have been subjected to rigorous item bias analysis.

In each of the three years the program has been in effect, approximately 30 percent of our applicants have failed to pass the screening test on the first attempt. For those applicants who wished it, self-instructional materials were provided, and two additional opportunities to take the test were provided within the same school year. Given these opportunities, the percent still not passing the first year was 21 percent, the second year 14 percent, and the third year 13 percent. The decline in failures may be due to the increased use of the self-instructional materials or to the self-selection of applicants (those who are in doubt of their competencies may be applying in smaller numbers).

Partly because of our experience, the Florida Board of Regents mandated in 1976 that all student teachers be required to pass competency tests before graduation, and the 1978 Legislature mandated that colleges of education require passing scores on nationally normed college entrance tests for admission.

The major unifying element of this program has been the strong commitment of the school board and superintendent and their firmness despite controversy and possible litigation. ■

Thomas S. Tocco is Assistant Superintendent for Research, Evaluation & Data Processing; Jane Elligett is Director, Evaluation & Planning Department; both with Pinellas County School System, Clearwater, Florida.

Adapted from an article in The Board, the official publication of the Florida School Boards Association.

Copyright © 1980 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.