

Minimal Competency Testing: A Look at State Standards

Chris Pipho

A seasoned observer of the education scene rounds up the variety of ways in which state legislatures are attempting to legislate mastery of "basic skills" by pupils at several grade levels.

The push for minimal competency standards for high school graduation and grade promotions that started in 1976 looks as if it will continue as a legislative and state board "hot topic" into 1977. From the Gallup Poll to official statewide needs assessments, from bridge clubs to backyard fences, legislators and educators are getting the message: "Something has to be done to restore confidence in American education."

Public support for educational change has always been difficult to measure, but today the person in the street has not only found a question to his/her liking but usually is quick to supply the answer: "Schools need to emphasize the basic skills." Equal educational opportunity is considered a noble goal for society as a whole, but parents are really more interested in having the schools bring their children up to grade level in reading, writing, and arithmetic before they are promoted to the next grade or graduate from high school. As adults read daily about lower test scores and rising education costs, and then look at their own child's performance or the ability of the high school graduate they just hired at work, both the problem and their recommended solution take on a sense of personal urgency.

State by state, school district by school district, the pressure is mounting for someone to do something about both the assumed and the real

dwindling school academic standards. Prior to January of this year, more than 16 states had taken either legislative or state board action to assure that some form of minimal competency testing or standards was initiated in the public schools. Figure 1 shows what the state activity looks like.

Minimal Competency Standards—Trend or Trellis?

Do state legislators and board of education members take action on a problem because other states have acted or because they are faced with a unique problem at home? At first glance it is easy to assume that an issue like minimal competency has been furthered by media exposure and a rapid exchange of information and ideas through an array of national legislation and education groups. A closer inspection of state action, however, tends not to support this notion.

In looking at enacted legislation and adopted state board rulings, it is difficult to find two states that have taken identical action. Even in Florida and California, where "early out" competency test ideas were enacted at about the same time, implementation procedures and specifics of the legislation are unique to each state. If action is tied to any trend, it is that many states recognized a similar problem at about the same time and then proceeded to take action in their own unique way. States that usually opt for a strong centralized approach to an issue have enacted rather prescriptive standards for local districts to meet. States that put more emphasis on local control have tended to pass legislation giving guidelines and responsibility to local boards of education.

The real issue at the state level is the effect of the law or ruling on school programs and individual students. As one state department of education official said: "It really depends if you want to enforce arbitrary cut-off scores which will penalize kids or if you want to put together a program that will assure each student a better education." This point was made by a state trying to encourage local districts to identify learning deficiencies early and then offer remedial instruction.

It is equally as interesting to hear a legislator or educator from another state argue for a strong centralized program of testing as the best means of helping individual students. While the wave of legislation looks like a single trend nationwide, at the state level it more closely represents a trellis with forces and counterforces all trying to make changes, while the existing governance and political structures continue to grow or just hold on to the status quo.

After following the movement for the past 18 months by reading legislation and talking with hundreds of people working on the implementation procedures, one can conclude that states are beginning to be more selective about the issues they wish to incorporate into legislation. Legislators and educators are asking more questions and studying alternatives before taking action. For example, in Florida in the 1976 legislative session, the issue of what happens to students leaving high school early or, for that matter, what options are available to those students, was one of the central reasons for amending the 1975 legislation.

In Connecticut in the 1976 session, three separate bills were introduced by the joint education committee in order to bring out a thorough discussion of compulsory attendance laws, testing programs, and alternative school models. Technically none of the bills was implemented, but they did serve as a "study vehicle" for legislation planned for 1977. To this extent, failed legislation in Connecticut and other states tends to serve as a barometer of the political give-and-take process evolving within a state. Studying failed or enacted legislation does not allow one to predict what states will do during this legislative session, but it does give one a taxonomy of questions that elicit a broader discussion of issues and hopefully assists in producing better state actions.

Minimal Competency Standards—A Look Ahead

State interest in minimal competency standards looks as if it will continue through 1977. In at least one state, a governor is including a call for minimal competency testing in his legislative proposals, and in a number of states, interim studies are being reported back to legislative bodies, undoubtedly to be followed by some form of legislation. In other areas of the country, local school boards are already saying that they have the legal power to change graduation requirements and have decided to move without state legislation. The following list of questions is bubbling up from the participants implementing minimal competency programs:

• *Minimum Proficiency Skills*

1. Who determines what the minimum skills should be?
2. How will these minimal skills be validated in the academic and work world?
3. If agreement on minimal skills is not possible, will unanimity be achieved by agreeing to reduced minimal standards; that is, to make minimal more minimal until it becomes meaningless?
4. Can both parents and educators agree on minimal standards of performance criteria that can be translated into a sequential learning program for master teaching?
5. Will statewide minimal competency standards eventually produce national goals for education, thereby reducing control over education?

• *Testing*

1. Will the schools test academic achievement of the basic skills with achievement tests only, or will applied performance tests be used, for example, filling out a job application applying the minimal skills to some sort of problem-solving issue?
2. How will minimal competency testing replace or supplement existing statewide assessment procedures?
3. Why can't state assessment programs be used for minimal competency achievement purposes?
4. Can testing terminology such as criterion-

referenced, domain-referenced, and objective-referenced be understood by both the parent and the educator so that everyone knows that all forms of testing contain an element of subjective opinion?

5. Will the use of learning hierarchies, prerequisite skills, and elaborate testing programs create a school learning environment based on minimal standards at minimal speed? What about excellence?

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6. Will the fear of passing students who have not mastered minimal skills or the fear of not passing those who actually have attained minimal skills produce a risk-free teaching environment?

7. If the school guarantees achievement standards for all graduates and these students fail to perform on a job later in life, will the schools be open for a round of second generation "Peter Doe" type court cases?

• *Finance*

1. Should the state finance, and the schools teach, only those agreed-to minimal skills? What about maximal skills?

2. What provisions need to be made in the state foundation formula for remedial classes and students staying in school longer to meet the minimal skill levels?

3. If a state equalization finance formula includes payment differentials for different pay grade levels, how will these need to be altered if large blocks of students stay in a given grade level?

4. What are the financial implications of the "early out" test? Will states pay for the full year of education for each student if they are in school or will students move so silently from high school to community colleges that the state could be paying for their education twice in one year?

5. How many levels of achievement or kinds of school programs can a state finance or a district afford to offer? Will the local district decide program offerings or will the minimum competency standards dictate this from the state level?

• *Students*

1. What happens to students not achieving the minimum standards? How long will the school keep these people enrolled?

2. At what age should students have the option to leave school? Can students leave without parent permission if they have passed the minimal competency standards?

3. What options are available to students who pass the minimal competency test and wish to leave school early? Are jobs available? Will the community college or university accept the student at any time during the year or at any age?

4. Will students be labeled early in their school career and kept out of vocational or college bound programs? What about the slow student or the late bloomer?

• *Staff*

1. Will minimal competency standards create a disincentive for school districts?—that is, too many early-out students too early or too many staying longer in the year could mean lost revenue. Would the negotiated teacher agreements need to include automatic mid-year decreases in teaching staff and support personnel assigned to each building?

2. Will the education program suffer under minimal competency standards? How will schools plan curricular offerings if they don't know how many students will stay in school for the whole year or how many will stay at a grade level longer than a year?

3. What will happen if large numbers of students pass the "early out" test but decide to stay in school using the test score as a threat over the teachers and administrators saying "keep me happy or I will leave"?

The search for meaning in the "tea leaves" of legislation and state board rulings is at best fraught with pitfalls and uncertainties. One

could argue that the public call for academic performance standards for grade-to-grade promotion or high school graduation only mirrors societal problems of which the school is a part. But, nonetheless, parents have issued a clear call. To ignore it or to give only a weak expression of concern with no honest action is likely to create an even greater backlash of public concern.

On the other hand, a state that moves too quickly or ineptly may create a chain of events

that could have the public calling for the total local control of schools or total federal control of schools. The situation cannot be compared to a pendulum with fortune swinging toward or away from the "righteous," but rather compared to a spiral that overlaps upward, building on successes and failures of the past, giving both educators and legislators an opportunity in America's 201st year to reinterpret the American dream—education for all.

Figure 1. Minimal Competency Standards—State Activity

State	Activity
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Arizona	State Department of Education Ruling—1975
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Requirements—Junior High School and High School: Beginning January 1, 1976, school districts are required to have students receiving the standard 8th-grade certificate able to read, write, and compute at the 6th-grade level. High school students must demonstrate an ability to read, write, and compute at the 9th grade level before graduation.

California	Legislation—SB 1112-1972 SB 1243-1975
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Requirements—High School: 16- and 17-year-olds may leave high school early if they pass the California High School Proficiency Tests setting minimum standards in reading and mathematics. Adults may also take the test and receive a high school diploma.

Legislation—AB 3408-1976

Requirements—Junior High School and High School: This law requires districts to establish standards of proficiency in the basic skills. Students are to be tested once between grades seven and nine and twice between grades ten and eleven. Conferences and remedial work are required. No high school diploma may be issued after June 1980 unless a proficiency test has been passed.

Colorado	Legislation—SB 180-1975
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Requirements—Junior High School and High School: The school districts that require proficiency tests for 12th grade graduation must give the proficiency tests as early as the 9th grade, report the scores to parents at least once each semester if the students fail the test, and provide remedial or tutorial services during the school day in the subject area in which a deficiency is noted.

Delaware	State Board of Education Ruling—1976
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Requirements—The state department of education is to develop, by January 1977, a list of general competencies to be used as a prerequisite for high school graduation. They are to select a test instrument, work on additional competency statements, and by July 1977 have a plan for competency based education for 9th grade to be used at the beginning of the 1977-78 school year.

Florida	CSSB 340-1975
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Requirements—High School: The law originally set up the "early out" test in Florida allowing students over the age of 14 with parent approval and age 16 without parent approval to take an examination in order to leave high school early. Implementation of this law was delayed, and the age requirement was removed by 1976 legislation. The state department has made provision to use the American Council on Education's GED high school equivalency test for a trial period. Emphasis is now on school districts working with community colleges in developing an educational plan for those students who demonstrate readiness for leaving school early.

CSSB 107-1976

Requirements—Elementary, Junior High School, and High School: This bill amends the Educational Accountability Act, provides that students must possess minimum skills necessary to function and survive in today's society. Students are to be tested in the basic skill areas in grades 3, 5, 8, and 11. Information is to be used to improve the state system of education by identifying needs and assessing how well districts and schools are meeting minimal standards. After July 1, 1977, pupil progression must be based on performance rather than social promotion. By the 1978/79 school year school districts must have a high school graduation program that will include the mastery of basic skills and the satisfactory performance in functional literacy in addition to the minimum number of credits required by the school board. Remediation programs and special differentiated diplomas for students with varying achievement levels must be provided.

Georgia	State Board of Education Ruling—1976
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Requirements—Elementary: The state board of education mandated that all fourth-graders in the state take a criterion referenced reading test. The results of this test are being studied in order to establish cut-off scores for grade-to-grade promotion.

High School: A one-year study is underway investigating the possibility of changing high school graduation requirements so as to include minimal proficiency standards for life role skills, including specific recommendations for the students as the learner, the individual, the citizen, the consumer, and the producer.

Maryland	Legislation—HB 1433-1976
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Requirements—Elementary: This law requires the state board of education to prescribe progressively ad-

vanced minimum reading levels for grades two through 12, and further provides that pupils may not enter grades three through eight until it has been determined that they have met the minimum level for the previous grade, with certain exemptions for special students.

State Department of Education—1975

Requirements—Elementary, Junior High School, and High School: The state department of education has developed a Maryland basic mastery test for reading which is now being administered in grades six, nine, and twelve. This "survival reading test" (forms b and c, 9th and 12th grade level) is also being administered in the fall of each school year to grades seven and 11 as a part of the statewide accountability program.

Michigan State Board of Education Ruling—1976

Requirements—High School: The state board has proposed a 12th grade minimal competency test covering life goal skills in four areas: (a) personal, family, and money, (b) civic and social responsibilities, (c) aesthetic and humanistic, and (d) employment. Statewide hearings will be conducted on this test during the early part of 1977, with official state board action coming later in the year.

Missouri State Board of Education—1976

Requirements—Junior High School: The state department of education has been requested to develop a basic skills test to measure the application of basic skills in areas of reading, mathematics, and government/economics. Three forms of the test will be pilot tested in the spring of 1977 with 8th graders. All districts will be mandated to give the test at the 8th grade by July 1, 1978. At this time the state board has not made high school graduation contingent upon successful completion of the test.

Nebraska State Department of Education—1975

Requirements—Elementary, Junior High School, and High School: School districts are required to establish a minimal performance level in reading, writing, and arithmetic. Schools are to readminister the evaluation instrument until mastery has been demonstrated by all students. The state department of education has developed a test instrument which schools may use or they may develop their own assessment device.

New Jersey Legislation—A. 1736-1976

Requirements—Elementary, Junior High School, and High School: The law mandates that the state set minimum reading and mathematics standards for local districts and that the local districts provide remedial work and interim goals for students to meet as they move toward these state standards.

New York Board of Regents Mandate—1976

Requirements—High School: Beginning with the graduation class of June 1979, high school students must be able to pass a basic competency test in reading and mathematics. The Board of Regents has under consideration plans for incorporating additional testing areas for the graduation requirements effective June 1980. These additional tests would include the areas of: (a) civics and citizenship, (b) practical science, including health and drug education, and (c) writing and language skills.

Oregon State Board of Education Ruling—1972 and 1976

Requirements—High School: Local school districts, by the end of 1978, must have established a program of high school courses leading to graduation based on proficiency in the basic skill areas of reading, listening, analysis, speaking, writing, and computation. Between 1978 and 1981 school districts are to move from assessing these basic skill areas in three program areas to include the remainder of the program areas required for high school graduation. Districts have the option of measuring competency in personal development, social responsibility, and career development or in program areas which replace these categories.

Vermont Board of Education Ruling—1976

Requirements—High School: The Vermont Board of Education has adopted minimal competency standards for local districts to use in setting criteria for high school graduation.

Virginia Legislation—HB 256-1976

Requirements—Elementary: The Virginia Standards of Quality Act requires that each school division give highest instructional priority to developing reading, communications, and mathematics skills of all students with particular attention to be given to primary grades (1-3) and the intermediate grades (4-6). By September 1978, the state board of education, in cooperation with local districts, shall establish specific minimum statewide educational objectives and a uniform statewide test in reading, communications, and mathematics skills. The test is to measure yearly progress for individual students.

Washington Legislation—SB 3026-1976

Requirements—Elementary and Junior High School: School districts are required, with community participation, to develop learning objectives for grades K-8 and measure for these objectives at least annually for all students. State funds are to be withheld from districts not meeting the standards.

Legislation—HB 1345-1976

Requirements—Elementary and High School: This law requires all fourth grade students be given a standardized achievement test in reading, mathematics, and language arts, with the results to be used by districts and parents to compare their children's achievement level with other pupils in the district, the state, and nation. Also required is a sample test to be given to 8th and 11th graders for the same purposes. [FL]



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