

NEVADA LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL BUREAU
OFFICE OF RESEARCH BACKGROUND PAPER

1977 No. 3

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

I

Many citizens view schools today with a certain skepticism. They believe that despite heavy expenditures, educational gains have been negligible at best. What is the purpose, the public asks, of sending students to school for 12 years if upon graduation these young persons cannot read well or compute accurately? A new resistance is growing toward the mere attendance of students in school; new questions are being asked about the outcome of this attendance.

As a result of public concern, the educational system is being asked to account for the quality of its product. Office of Research Background Paper No. 11 of 1975 provides an overview of recent trends in educational accountability. This paper focuses on one aspect of educational accountability, competency-based education, which has been defined by the Oregon Competency Based Education Program as:

A performance oriented process that establishes, facilitates with a known degree of effectiveness, and documents the attainment of desired learning outcomes that are based on the ability to function successfully in life roles.

Stung by reports about the deficiencies of today's high school graduates, some states are launching efforts to insure that the graduates develop certain basic skills. Many believe the surest route to this is through competency testing. With proper tests, some say, proficiencies or capabilities can be assessed rather than assumed and society's expectations for graduating seniors can be verified as well as identified.

Expecting high school students to demonstrate proficiency in important areas of the curriculum is consistent with good

educational practice. Little controversy exists on that point. There are, however, several issues involved in competency-based education. They concern:

1. The appropriateness of competency testing. Broadly stated, the general purpose of secondary education is twofold:
(1) to nourish the talents and abilities of each individual,
(2) to develop in students common attitudes and competencies sufficient for society to function.

Many skills can be measured by tests of competency. Complex behaviors, however, are more difficult to gauge. The determination of what educations should consist of and the determination of its measurement in the affective realm is still an indefinite science. The documentation of planned experience (i.e., credit requirements) therefore, remains a useful measure to educators desiring that the diploma reflect more than demonstrable proficiency. Such educators argue that competency tests can strengthen the evaluation process but they are insufficient by themselves as criteria for high school graduation. Competency tests need to be paired, some believe, with verification of experience or course work to document a comprehensive education.

The traditional credit system has the advantage of flexibility, course by course, as well as ease of documentation. Educationally, it also accommodates individual interest. The disadvantage of the credit system centers around the problem of inconsistent standards. Quality may vary considerably school by school.

Many believe that competency testing allows for specific examination of skills. It also has the advantage of requiring careful thought about the course objectives and the competencies to be measured. This approach can bring a certain honesty to the diploma. It can define precise expectations and report to parents, the school and the public whether or not these expectations have been obtained.

2. The subject areas to be covered by the tests. One point of view is that competency tests should focus upon fundamental

skills such as arithmetic, reading and writing. Others, however, are concerned that this approach is too narrow and may adversely affect other important learning areas such as the ability to think creatively and independently, and the ability to analyze and synthesize in problem resolution. Another concern is that narrowly defined competency testing may create the climate in schools for the deemphasis of the teaching of important social qualities such as maturity, dependability and the ability to work constructively in a group setting.

3. When and how often competency tests should be given. The schools currently using competency tests as a partial requirement for high school graduation advise early testing, preferably at the 9th or 10th grade level. An early diagnosis allows students to be given remedial programs in sufficient time for the required proficiencies to be achieved before the end of the senior year.
4. The definition of proficiency. This question centers around whether schools should test proficiency in skills and knowledge learned in school or test the application of such learning to tasks which are required after graduation, or both. Related to this issue are the questions of what should be the minimum acceptable levels of proficiency or achievement and what type of tests should be used. In discussing tests, educators emphasize that tests which measure norms (how a student ranks on a scale with other students) should not be confused with criteria-referenced tests which measure what a student knows (i.e., competency in a defined skill).
5. What should be the basis for high school graduation? Two national groups, the National Association of Secondary School Principals and participants attending the conference on America's Secondary Schools: New Dimensions for Educating Youth, have provided some recommendations for changes in high school graduation requirements. Conference participants concurred with the findings of the National Association of Secondary School Principals Task Force on graduation requirements that the high school diploma should be based on verification of:

- (1) An ability to read, write and compute with specified proficiency;
- (2) An acquaintanceship with the American experience, including the process and structure of democratic governance, and
- (3) The successful completion of a series of courses and/or planned experiences, some of which involve a group setting.

Participants also agreed that the proposed criteria for the high school diploma be built on:

- (1) Verified competency measures, including functional literacy in reading, writing, speaking and listening; ability to compute, including decimals and percentages; knowledge of the history and culture of the United States, including democratic governance.
- (2) Verified units or credits, including successful completion of credits or units equal to a regular course load through the first semester of the senior year; and sufficient attendance in courses and programs to gain fully the education and social benefits of group situations.

6. What should happen to students who do not qualify for a competency-based high school diploma? If a single diploma is issued to all students regardless of competency level, then, according to many, the public, the students and the schools are all back to the beginning--the diploma "has no meaning."

To recognize students who have spent 4 or more years in high school, but who still lack certain competencies, various suggestions have been made. These include:

- (1) Special diplomas;
- (2) Certificates of competency;

(3) Diplomas with endorsements certifying that the student has, or has not, met specified competency;

(4) Certificates of attendance.

Educators say the overriding purpose in adopting new policies and regulations for improving the credibility of the high school diploma is to insure secondary students the opportunity to develop competencies in certain areas. In establishing such policies and requirements, provision must be made for those students who cannot attain desired proficiency in these competencies, after repeated opportunities have been provided to them, to attain them.

7. Who should have the legal responsibility for determining and measuring required educational competencies? In the past, the educational system was centralized at state levels and tended to be uniform and prescriptive. In the last 2 or 3 decades, control of education has become more a function of local school districts. Efforts to standardize curriculum and measure educational achievement at state levels has been opposed vigorously by local school systems who believe they should set educational standards.

Related to this issue is the question of whether, if the state is charged with setting and measuring required educational competencies, local school districts can require competencies beyond those required by the state.

8. What should be the interrelationship between minimal competency testing, alternative options to high school completion and early exit from school? This, according to The Education Commission of the States, is the crux of the whole competency measurement issue.

II

Several states have passed, during the 1976 legislative sessions, legislation relating to competency-based education. These states include California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Maryland, New Jersey and Virginia. The approach taken in the legislation varies from comprehensive measures enacted in California and Florida to a measure which specifies minimum

reading skills for grades 2 through 12 enacted in Maryland. Competency-based education was also considered but failed in several states, including Idaho, Kansas and Tennessee.

According to The Education Commission of the States, many state boards of education and local school districts have recently issued rulings on competency measurement. A publication, produced by the commission, listing these entitites and their rulings is cited at the end of this paper and is available for review in the Office of Research.

III

Research by the Nevada Department of Education indicates that in the past there have been statewide performance standards for elementary students in Nevada but that no such standards, besides completion of specified curriculum, have existed for high school graduation.

Prompted by the same concerns noted earlier in this paper, the State Board of Education directed its staff, in January 1976, to "conduct a study of the feasibility of establishing policies and regulations for the issuance of the high school diploma based on competency measures * * *." Major activities of the study have included gathering of material, attending conferences, reviewing statutes and conducting an opinion survey.

The study concluded that:

- (1) Historical precedents exist for the measurement of student achievement and aptitude by the Department of Education, but existing statutes neither mandate state-level testing nor do they prohibit the department or state board from engaging in such activity.

- (2) It is the opinion of selected groups surveyed in Nevada that the high school diploma does not now indicate competencies in reading, writing, speaking and arithmetic and that students should be required to demonstrate certain basic skills before receiving a high school diploma.

(3) It is evident that models for basing the issuance of a high school diploma upon the demonstrated competencies can be developed. This is evident by the existence of various models.

(4) Given a mandate and sufficient resources, a model designed for Nevada could be implemented.

Based on the study and its conclusions, the State Board of Education has directed its staff to develop, in cooperation with school districts and other interested parties, a recommended listing of minimum proficiencies needed in reading, writing and arithmetic for high school graduation. The staff plans to complete this task by late spring 1977.

As a final note, it is recommended by those familiar with the implementation of minimum competency requirements for high school graduation that the development and implementation of such competency requirements proceed in a well-planned, orderly sequence. The establishment of competency-based high school graduation can have a profound impact on the entire elementary and secondary curriculum, existing promotion-retention policies and practices, and grading. In effect, it can influence the total outcome of a child's educational process and his preparation for adult life.

This paper has only attempted to highlight issues. It has made no attempt to assess the situation in Nevada concerning the need, or lack of it, for competency-based education. Rather, it has tried to make the subject comprehensible. Finally, it has made no attempt to recommend action. Various proposals are represented with the arguments their proponents use and do not reflect any position of the Office of Research.

SUGGESTED READING

(Available in the Research Library)

Roth, Robert A. A Study of Competency Based Teacher Education. Michigan Department of Education, March 1976.

Report of the California Commission for Reform of Intermediate and Secondary Education. The Rise Report. Sacramento: California State Department of Education, 1975.

The National Association of Secondary School Principals. Competency Tests and Graduation Requirements. Reston: The National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1976.

"Competency Based High School Diploma--A Feasibility Study," a Preliminary Report Prepared for the State Board of Education by the Nevada Department of Education, July 1976.

"Competency Based Education: Definitional Issues and Implications For Cooperation Across Educational Institutions and Levels," Remarks by Walter Hathaway, Director of the Oregon Competency Based Education Program, before the Competency-Based Education Workshop, July 13-16, 1976.

Pipho, Chris. "Update II: Minimal Competency Testing." The Education Commission of the States, July 30, 1976.

Bills in the States--CS/S.B. 107, Florida; CS/S.B. 340, Florida; A.B. 3408, California; A.B. 2725, California; S.B. 1502, California; S.B. 180, Colorado; H.B. 1433, Maryland; PL 405, Connecticut; H.B. 256, Virginia.

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