SENIOR HONORS THESIS

Daryl Bayer
Ball State University
May 16, 1979

Advisor: Dr. Paul Schumacher
MINIMAL COMPETENCY TESTING:

REACTION OR SOLUTION?
PURPOSE

The purpose behind the writing of this paper was twofold. Not only did I write it to complete my requirements and graduate on the Honors Program, but also I chose the topic of minimal competency testing because it is a concept that I will most likely come into contact with as a teacher in the next few years. I did not attempt to take a stand on the issue, but instead simply wrote as objectively as possible in covering the topic. Since most school systems in Indiana have not yet been exposed to competency testing, my research was derived mostly from materials dealing with other states and articles written by those who have studied the concept in great detail. Having done the project, I feel as if I have a much greater understanding of the most controversial issue in education in the year 1979.

I would also like to extend a hearty thanks to Dr. Paul Schumacher of the English Department at Ball State University for acting as my advisor for my thesis.
MINIMAL COMPETENCY TESTING:
REACTION OR SOLUTION?

Ever since public education made its initial appearance in the United States decades ago, there has always been a great desire by educators, parents, and students to continually improve the quality of education. Indeed changes have occurred, some for the better, some for the sake of change, and some that never accomplished what they set out to do. Through these innovations, controversy has been a constant by-product. Controversy has often produced positive and qualitative action, thus achieving its goal of improving education. On the other hand, this same controversy has resulted in anger, hate, parent-school separation, community-school separation, embittered educators, parents, and students, and even court battles.

Education seems to have always been accompanied by controversy. Whether the issue has been open schools, censorship of books, cost of education, methods of teaching, grading, or any other, there have always been two sides and valid, supportive arguments for each. The newest, most argumentative, and most discussed issue in education today is what is known as minimal competency testing. To define the concept, it is perhaps more convenient to explain the impetus behind the movement.
About ten years ago, parents sought to loosen up the traditional curriculum because they felt their children were being bored and the schools needed to interest the children more in order to get the children to want to learn and acquire knowledge. Reacting to the parental pressure, school officials devised such concepts as "creative programming," "continuous progress primaries," "recreational enrichment programs," and open schools began to become much more popular with an emphasis on freedom for children rather than on academics and basic skills. Courses in consciousness and self-awareness replaced, or at least became more popular than, courses dealing with the previous academic curriculum of reading, writing, math, social studies, science, and language arts. However, as often happens in education, the pendulum swung back a few years ago and parents demanded a return to the basics.¹

The question of what the "basics" include has caused almost as much fury as has the idea of minimal competency testing itself. Some feel the basics are only reading, writing, and arithmetic, the three R's so to speak. Others feel the basics should include science and social studies, plus other areas of the curriculum. These people believe it is just as important for a person to be able to read a map and understand the function of the body parts as it is to be able to write a sentence or add two numbers together. Still others feel that actually the basics go beyond the academic studies and should also include values clarification or actual "survival skills" such as filling out a job application,
balancing a checkbook, being able to find a job and hold it, learning to be a producer, consumer, and citizen along with acquiring basic knowledge. These people believe that students graduating from high school ought to be able to function in the real world, which includes much more than the three R's or academics in general. Each person probably has a different opinion as to what the basics are and what should be taught in the classroom.

Putting the issue of the definition of basics aside, the real problem centered on the fact that parents, employers, students, legislators, and even some administrators and teachers, demanded a change in the modes of operation in the schools. It was not the occasional case of a student graduating from high school being considered incompetent that bothered them, but what irritated the public was the fact that incompetence was appearing in potentially bright, ambitious, and intelligent students. The public argued that schools had taken no action to reverse the gradual decline in student competence and achievement, but instead had tolerated and even excused it. The schools were just not setting high standards and were not working hard enough to get the students to reach goals. Although schools have received the majority of the blame, there are other factors that have played important roles in the decline in student achievement. These include racial conflicts, family deterioration, drugs, delinquency, and even television. Naturally, though, the schools were criticized the most often because school is the place where children are supposed to be learning their basic skills and
acquiring necessary knowledge. People tend to forget the fact that a child who is taking drugs, or has come from a broken home, or enjoys watching television all night is not the ideal student to try to teach. It seems the parents, the ones who are clamoring the loudest for a change in schools, should perhaps look at themselves to find at least one source of the problem.

Thus the cry rang out among the public for accountability, some way to ensure that schools are actually teaching students what they need to know. The result was passing bills for minimal competency testing through state legislatures and local school systems. There was even a little poem created to demonstrate their feelings:

To fix schools that don't teach and kids that don't read,
We'll add competency testing to prove there's a need.
If tests don't force schools to teach kids to learn,
Why pay? Schools should only get what they earn!4

The growth of minimal competency testing has been phenomenal, and unequalled in the history of education. Never has an educational movement swept over the country so quickly as this one. In the first half of 1977 alone, some seventy bills involving competency testing were introduced in the state legislatures.5 Just three years ago, only two states had legislation that mandated competency testing. Today there are some thirty-four states that require some sort of competency testing as a part of their overall academic program.6 All of the states either have already passed legislation, have legislation pending, or legislative or state board studies are currently being
conducted by the state.7 Indiana is one of those states that is still conducting studies and working out details in order to introduce minimal competency testing into their school systems.

Diane Ravitch, professor of history and education at Columbia University Teachers' College, and who has served on a National Academy of Education panel studying minimal competency testing, explains the beginning of the movement:

Competency testing is a grass roots movement that got started because people really got fed up with educators who have hidden behind a wall of jargon for years. Educators were not understanding how taxpayers really felt. The cost of education was rising rapidly but students were not reading. So they turned to their legislators and acted out of frustration.8

Other educators feel that the minimal competency testing movement is a "bandwagon affair and a result of anti-teacher, anti-education mood in this country."9 They believe that minimal competency testing is really a code meaning "cut the budget." Other critics of the movement claim that what began as an earnest parental concern may have developed into a political issue favoring young, ambitious politicians. Thus the entire movement could be promoting more politics than proficiency.10

Changes have been made since the real influx of the movement in 1976. In 1976, the legislation dealing with competency testing were normally one-page bills, and the mandates were hastily drafted without much attention to information on existing testing or competency-based programs. The mandates also required local school districts to implement a full-scale program, often very quickly. However, in 1978,
legislatures were moving much more carefully and taking a much closer look at the mandates before passing them through. They were holding more hearings, reviewing bills in greater detail, and giving more consideration to additional studies when needed. In general, they were asking more questions and looking deeper into the situation than ever before.11

At the state board level, elaborate hearings are being held which involve all groups through the formation of an advisory board. After the policy has been set, provisions are made for a period of review prior to the policy becoming final.12

Other new developments have testing now beginning in elementary schools with several testing checkpoints along the way. Rather than simply being exposed to one test prior to graduation, each student will be checked several times throughout his school career. Also, more emphasis is being placed on remedial work and other problems created by or not handled in competency legislation.13 Two bills have been introduced in the United States Congress that would require schools receiving federal funds to implement competency testing as part of their overall program.14 Plus, competency testing has been recommended by two task forces of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), has been endorsed by the Council on Basic Education, and is being studied extensively by the Educational Commission of the States.15

Although some people, educators included, believe that minimal competency testing is a completely new, ingenious idea
that school officials and legislators devised, the fact is that minimal competency testing is a slightly archaic concept brought back in the 1970's for another round. Earlier in this century there is evidence that pupils in the eighth grade were given a test to determine whether or not they should be admitted to high school. The testing endured quite a long time until about fifty years ago when schools began to turn away from testing to assess competency in favor of testing to promote learning.¹⁶

Today's definition of minimal competency testing is fairly similar to the one used earlier in the century. Students must pass an examination to demonstrate that he is competent in the basic academic skills before he can graduate and receive a diploma from his high school. The testing program usually is accompanied by a remedial program designed to correct deficiencies of the students who do not perform well enough on the test to be considered competent. Remedial work may be in one area or several areas, depending on the student.¹⁷ The testing section of the program is supposed to be the end product of a competency-based education process. However, what has often been found is that the tests are presented to students without instruction in the competencies they are supposed to know. Instead of beginning with the competencies themselves, schools are starting with the tests and working their way backward. A good, well-organized competency-based education program should begin by defining the outcomes each student is expected to attain. Then the instructional program through which each student can arrive at these outcomes is designed.
The basic premise in the competency-based education process is that every student can arrive at the desired goals and thus become competent. Every student, properly placed in an appropriate instructional program, should learn the basic skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values taught in the program.\textsuperscript{18}

The ideal purpose of competency testing is twofold. It is not only designed to measure students' mastery of the curriculum, but also to predict minimal competencies required in the adult world.\textsuperscript{19} In other words, a student is to learn the basic skills and also be able to apply the skills in real life situations. Thus the tests can become the device for assessing what is a good school, or a good school district, or a good curriculum, or a good teacher, not to mention a good student.

Competency testing is a neat, statistically elegant method for people far removed from the classroom, such as boards, state boards, and legislators, to make judgments about education. Using the information they acquire, they can make decisions about funding for the next school year, for example.

Since minimal competency testing is a rather general concept, there are various forms of it now being utilized. With some states, the responsibility for the competencies lies with the state board, while others have allowed local school districts to assume this responsibility. Some states have tests at various intervals to determine if a student should be promoted to the next grade. Others stress basic skills throughout high school until the students can pass the test. Still other school systems employ an "exit exam" whereby once the student
has passed the test, he may graduate. The student must have achieved the eighth or ninth grade level as a prerequisite for graduation. Finally, other states have stressed more than the basic academic skills. The Maryland State Board of Education has implemented a "Project Basic" which tests abilities in work, leisure, and citizenship as well as basic skills. 20

The rationale behind competency testing is best summarized as a way to fight the decline of skills portrayed by students in schools across the United States. According to advocates of the movement, it is not intended to be cure-all, but is rather a rational approach to worsening problems in American education. To silence their critics, they claim that competency testing does not cause failure or increase the frequency of failure, but instead only recognizes it so students can be helped. In fact, competency testing may increase achievement by motivating students to achieve previously-set goals.

There is a great deal of evidence available that shows the need for minimal competency testing. Perhaps the most astounding report came from the secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, Joseph Califano. Califano reported the findings of the National Assessment of Educational Process, which surveyed a large cross-section of seventeen-year-old students. They discovered that:

* More than 12 out of 100 were functionally illiterate.
* Only 34% could determine the most economical size of a product.
* Only 10% could calculate a simple taxi fare.
* Only 53% were aware that the President of the United States does not appoint members of Congress. 21
Other organizations have also collected evidence proving a substantial reduction in student skills and achievement. The National Association of Secondary School Principals Committee on Competency Testing and Graduation Requirements reports that a steady decline has occurred in Scholastic Aptitude Test scores among high school juniors. In the past fourteen years, the mean score on the math section of the test has dropped from 478 to 429, while the mean score on the verbal section has also plummeted from 502 to 470. However, there have been reasons presented explaining the decline of the scores, which suggest that the scores do not reflect skill levels. Some possible factors include the fact that students with a lower level of achievement are remaining in school to receive a diploma as a prerequisite for obtaining a job. The fluctuation in family size may also be a cause as intelligence and achievement diminish for younger members of a large family. In the past few years, the birth rate has fallen and there is now an indication that there has been a turn-around in scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills for children born after 1962. Since the size of an average family is smaller, the scores have taken a turn for the better and gradually increased.

Social and political pressures may be affecting students in an adverse manner. For example, a student being bused for integration purposes may feel pressured and uncomfortable in the new environment. Therefore, his academic ability may not register as high as normal. Finally, the teacher-pupil ratio has increased. Students no longer can receive as great an
amount of individual attention from the teacher. The teacher no longer has the luxury of working with a handful of students, but instead must teach a class perhaps 1½ or two times greater than what it should be in order for each student to receive the maximal benefits. 23

Taking into account that possibly the Scholastic Aptitude Test is not the most reliable indicator of skill level, there is still overwhelming data that does indicate and support the problem of skill level decline. For example, the United States Office of Education discovered, in a study, that some 23 million Americans are considered to be functionally illiterate. The National Assessment of Educational Process claims that graduates of the 1975 class lost an equivalent to one-half year of learning in science knowledge between 1969-1973. Studies of writing skills in 1970 and 1974 show that thirteen and seventeen-year-old youth are using a much more limited vocabulary and are writing in a shorter, more primer-like style. 24

The American College Testing program reports a decline in average scores of students applying for college admission. Once students enter college, the students are reading material that is on a lower level than it once was. The Association of American Publishers felt it necessary to revise its textbook study guide for college freshmen in 1975, gearing the reading toward the ninth grade level. College officials, business firms, and public agencies are dismayed at the inability of younger persons to express themselves clearly in writing. 25

There are other indicators such as an attitude survey
conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Process, a federally financed research organization in Denver, which shows that secondary school students are not taking much homework home. Sixty-one per cent of seventeen-year-olds surveyed spend less than five hours each week on homework. Another report shows that most teenagers can name the President of the United States, but fewer than 50% can name their senators. A National Task Force on Citizenship reports that teenagers "float atop an abyss of ignorance when it comes to understanding political process."26

Colleges are complaining of ill-prepared freshmen on campuses, which is forcing the schools to include more courses in remedial writing and reading. Even high schools are admitting to graduating functionally illiterate students. The parents of one student in Long Island sued the school system for malpractice when their child graduated without the skills necessary to function in the adult world.27 The diploma has lost its credibility and no longer is indicative of competence in basic skills. In fact, it is estimated that 15-20%, or 1.4 million, of all high school students are functionally illiterate. Fifty per cent are deficient in one of more areas of basic academic skills according to a study performed at the University of Texas. Currently there is a general dissatisfaction among the public concerning education, and citizens believe that the skill level decline and illiteracy have broad and serious social effects.28

In discussing the reasons behind the decline in skill level and achievement, there are not only factors involving schools,
but also factors that have nothing to do with the schools. Mentioned earlier was the humanistic approach to education, which was concerned with psychological aspects rather than academics. Students were promoted out of concern for their psyche rather than on ability and achievement. Teachers are noticing a stronger lack of respect, and unfortunately are seeking the path of least resistance. Although schools are receiving the majority of the blame, the home life situation certainly is an important contribution to the problem. The family pattern, with women working or parents putting more interest in their own development, has led to trouble among children. Family deterioration and children coming from a broken-home situation has sometimes caused a lessening of interest in school for affected children. Problems at home have undoubtedly resulted in drug abuse, vandalism, delinquency, and emotional disturbances among students. Also, racial conflicts and television have been suggested as other causes. 29

Educational psychologist Abraham Maslow sees the logicality of the curriculum as being completely unjustifiable. Maslow claims that human needs can be listed in a hierarchy as follows: 1) survival 2) safety and security 3) love and belonging 4) self-esteem and 5) self-actualization. A person cannot satisfy the needs in the hierarchy until the preceding ones have been largely satisfied. Therefore, it is not logical for a child who does not possess necessary basic skills to have self-actualization classes such as Shakespeare and art appreciation. 30

There remains the unresolved issue as to whether a school
should be a socializing institution as well as an academic one. Those who favor the more academic, and consequently competency testing, say that socialization influences of schools have not been helpful in solving problems such as alcoholism, drug addiction, value development, health problems, smoking, vandalism, violence, and moral and sexual dilemmas. Therefore, schools need only concentrate on basic academic skills within the curriculum.

Advocates of minimal competency testing see many benefits as a result of its implementation in school systems. The curriculum would be based more on practical uses of education such as survival skills, and would include emphasis on remedial instruction. Teachers would have to improve their techniques of instruction and focus on basic skills and remediation to suit individual needs. Competency testing would restore meaning and dignity to the high school diploma. It would also reduce our current alarming illiteracy rate and would provide a system of quality control. Overall, competency testing, if properly implemented, would result in more carefully organized approaches to teaching and a more systematic learning process.31

The general public has reacted positively to the movement. They see competency testing as a program that can help all students to attain skills that they will need in order to function acceptably in adult life. They do not view the system as a panacea for all educational ills. However, they believe it will be a way to know what is being accomplished to correct their childrens' deficiencies, and feel that it will provide
a chance for unification of effort rather than increased polar-
ization between school and community. With minimal competency
testing, the community may no longer carry the feeling that the
educational establishment is unresponsive. Instead it will
provide an opportunity to make clear to the public what schools
are about, to inform them of what the schools are doing, to
renew the integrity of public education, and to better utilize
educational and community resources.32

Newspapers, magazines, television networks, and profes-
sional critics have wholeheartedly supported competency test-
ing. They have found that those schools that have adapted
the program are experiencing a huge rise in cases of parental
involvement in the schools. For the most part, students have
also reacted positively to the system. It forces the student
to be accountable for his performance. Since the student knows
what is expected of him, he has a personal stake in the results
of his educational career. It is believed that less than 1%,
including special education and learning disabled students, of
all students do not have the necessary ability to learn the
skills that are required to pass the test. Critics have claimed
that competency testing could label students thereby lowering
their self-esteem. Supporters of the program believe that
self-concept is indeed very important, but they feel that
being unable to read affects the self-concept. They point to
studies performed by Benjamin Bloom and others that demon-
strates improvement in achievement levels among slow learners
also increases self-concept.33
The feeling for competency testing and a return to the basics is so strong that in some cities, parents of school children are being given a choice of sending their children to a special public school that has strict discipline, including a dress code, and with emphasis on the three R's, homework, and patriotism. A 1975 Gallup Poll of Public Attitude Toward the Public Schools asked this question to a random sampling of adults. "If you lived in one of these cities and had children of school age, would you send them to such a school or not?" Affirmative answers were given by 57%. The same question was given to a sample of members of the National Education Association and they responded with 61% affirmative answers.4

The supporters of minimal competency testing summarize their case in this way:

If schools must assume the responsibility for a productive youth, they have the obligation to identify students without basic skills and correct deficiencies. With competency testing, students will be sent into society confident that they possess basic skills necessary to function in the real world. Not only are schools businesses, but they are also institutions for helping society and its citizens. With this approach, schools can make a constructive step toward providing the goal of democracy-education for everyone.5

As was mentioned earlier in the paper, educational issues have always been surrounded by controversy. Minimal competency testing is certainly no exception to the rule. On the face of it, competency testing sounds like a great idea that would solve the educational crisis we now face. As a society, we
believe in the magical powers of tests. Schools crave good publicity which can be derived immediately by creating a testing program and subsequently, when the program helps to improve the schools. No matter how great an idea or a system is, it has its pitfalls. Critics of competency testing feel that a legislator or state board member using a mandated test to bring improvement in student achievement is preposterous. Also the haste with which it has been adopted shows that it has not been well-planned. A study performed by the National Academy of Education found that competency testing is:

...basically unworkable and they create more social problems than they could conceivably solve. Continuing any extensive effort and funds in this direction is wasteful and takes away attention from the major tasks of improving education. Competency testing could become the sole magnet of educational energies. We fear that the minimums may become the maximums.36

One of the biggest complaints registered by critics of the movement is that the tests are unfair. For one thing, there is an inadequate phase-in period for students first being exposed to the test. Students may not receive notice of the test until high school and by then, it is too late to make up what has been missed for ten or eleven years. There is also an inadequate test/instruction match. Often there is a lack of curricular validity, whereby test objectives are not identical to course objectives. Even if the course and test objectives are the same, there must be some measure of whether or not schools are actually discussing the topics in class. The tests could be measuring what the school never
taught the students. One critic claims, "A school that cannot assure the curricular and instructional validity of its competency tests should not use them as a basis for denying promotion or a diploma to any of its students." 37 Some items are extremely difficult to test or teach, and students could be penalized even though they cannot be personally faulted. In fact the question of legality of competency testing has even been raised. Another anti-test critic states, "A competency test that measures adult life-role skills that were never taught in the school, and then is used as a basis for denying a diploma, is arguably so arbitrary as to violate due process of law." 38

Critics have also raised the question of racial discrimination. It has been suggested that minimal competency testing could possibly be a middle-class white method of resegregating blacks by using discriminatory tests. The actual consequence of many school districts has been racial differentiation. 39

Another problem that is just really beginning to make itself clear is the cost of implementing and maintaining the program. First there are the set-up costs of legislation which includes hearings, data, studies, and periodic revision. If just one staff member worked one year at this phase, it would cost around $50,000. Implementation costs are also enormous. These include information costs in deciding how to implement, pilot testing of instruments, information costs to regulatees to determine what is required of them, and submitting plans from local districts to state boards and back and forth. This alone costs $26,500 to $173,200 per district
in the state of Oregon. Administrative costs such as record-keeping and reporting expenses cost at least $25,000 per person per district. Add on to that enforcement costs of the state making sure local districts obey the laws and rules. There is also the cost of test development, which costs anywhere from $25 to $210 per item. Printing, mailing, and scoring expenses could be as high as $20-30 million. Plus, running a program from a state office costs in the neighborhood of $65,000 to $945,000 yearly. Once the testing has been completed, there is the expense of remediation to consider. In the state of Washington, it costs $43-47 million for each reading and math. New Jersey has appropriated $70 million in 1978-79 as compared with $30 million in 1976-77 for remediation purposes.40

There exists other conceivable difficulties resulting from the use of competency tests. If considerable percentages of students fail the tests, examinations may be made easier to avoid embarrassing students and the school system. Educators may gear their teaching toward the test to enhance the reputation of the school system. If tests are made too easy, passing them will not prove anything and the quality of education will suffer. It also assumed that school skills will make an automatic transfer to real-life, on-the-job skills. Finally, national or statewide standards and criteria would violate the principle of a locally controlled American educational system. It is the belief of the critics that competency testing should not be the only criteria used in evaluation.
since public education has broader goals than those reflected by the tests. Students, teachers, and public education should not be evaluated exclusively by such a narrow measure.41

As far as approaches states have taken to competency testing, it is difficult to find two that are identical. Each state's implementation procedures and specifics of its legislation are unique. In general each state has one of two approaches in regulating the test. Either they have a strong centralized approach which sets prescriptive standards for local districts to meet, or control is left to the local boards of education.42 Among the 31 states that have mandated competency testing, most seem to agree on the identification of the basic skill areas: reading, math, and communications. (This study included only 31 states, however, there are now at least 34 at the time of this writing). Only Florida and California have enacted legislation that permits early exit from high school. Early-exit laws allow school districts to award the equivalent of a high school diploma to students who pass a designated test, even if the students have not earned the minimum number of credits traditionally required for graduation.

Twenty of the 31 states have competency standards that will affect regular high school graduation. Grade promotion appears to be tied to competency testing in only four states. Identification of students who need remedial assistance appears to be a common element in much of the state-mandated action. Twenty-one of the 31 states mention or apply this concept.
While 31 states have mandated some form of activity, not all of them have programs that are operating. Only Arizona had requirements that affected 1977 high school graduation. Six states had programs in effect in 1975, 1976, and 1977, but none of these involved either high school graduation or grade-to-grade promotion. All of the states have now taken some form of action toward implementation.43

Although states differ in the specifics of their programs, general questions have been raised during the process of writing and instituting state mandates that must be dealt with before actual implementation takes place. These include:

* Who should determine what the minimal skills should be?

* Should these standards be set at the national, state, or local level?

* Should high school graduation be based just on achievement of the basic skills or are course requirements and teacher opinion equally important?

* Will statewide minimal competency standards eventually produce state goals for education, thereby reducing local control over education?

* Will schools test academic achievement of the basic skills with ordinary achievement tests only, or will they use applied performance tests?

* How will minimal competency testing replace or supplement existing statewide assessment procedures?

* Will the use of learning hierarchies, prerequisite skills, and elaborate testing programs create a school learning environment that encourages students to attain minimal standards at a minimal rate of speed? What about excellence? How will programs for the gifted and other kinds of special education fit into the schemes?

* If the school guarantees achievement standards for all graduates and these students fail to perform on a job later in life, will schools be open for another round of education for them?
*Should the state finance, and the schools teach, only the minimal skills?*

*What provisions need to be made in the state foundation formula for remedial classes and for students who stay in school longer than 12 or 13 years to meet the minimal skill levels?*

*If a state equalization finance formula includes payment differentials for different pay-grade levels, how will these have to be altered if large numbers of students stay in a given grade level longer than usual, or leave school earlier than usual?*

*What are the financial implications of early-out tests?*

*What happens to students who do not achieve the minimal standards? How long will they stay in school?*

*At what age should students have the option to leave school? Can students leave without parental permission if they reach the minimal competency standards?*

*What options are available to students who pass the competency test and wish to leave school early? Are jobs available? Will the community college or university accept students at any age?*

*Will students be labeled slow learners in their school career and be kept out of vocational or college-bound programs? What about the student who is slow or the late bloomer?*

*What part should teacher opinion and judgment play in determining which students have met minimum standards?*

In choosing the test that they would employ, the state of North Carolina looked at seven standards and then decided which instrument met all of the guidelines. The standards were: 1) the functional application of basic skills 2) matching educational objectives 3) minimum competency emphasis 4) commitment to further development 5) cultural bias 6) technical capability and 7) ease of test administration.

Once the test was chosen by a 15-member committee it was administered and the committee sought answers to several points: 1) the relationship of projected instruments to well-established norm references test of reading and math.
2) the consequences of various cutoff scores for each instrument.
3) the best combination of items from the three tests in each area to be used in one final test.
4) the performance of exceptional children.
5) the number of students expected to fail.
6) performance by subgroups (income, sex, ethnic, etc.)
7) the information on the logistics of the test—manner of test administration, monitoring, and scoring.

Since competency testing is relatively just in the early stages of its rebirth, data on various states and school systems upon implementation is not abundant. However, there is some available information on such places as Denver, Colorado. Denver was a pioneer in the "new" minimal competency testing as it began the movement some twenty years ago. Students must pass tests in spelling, reading, math, and grammar in order to graduate. On the average, 75% of the students pass the tests the first time. The rest receive remedial help until they are tested again. Barry Beal, director of Denver's school evaluation, estimates that 1-3% never pass. This figure has dropped from 15% back in 1959.47

In Gary, Indiana all but nine seniors passed the first test in 1977. The program has been well-received by teachers and their unions. Classroom atmosphere has improved, standardized test scores have jumped, and there is greater amount of parental involvement in the schools.48

In Maryland, the state school superintendent appealed to the public for help. Twenty-two thousand residents were given questionnaires asking them to rate, in order of importance,
what competencies people should be able to do by the time they graduate. As part of the state's "Project Basic" which will include survival skills as a requirement for graduation, students must be able to perform such things as: 1) write their name legibly 2) write a friendly letter 3) write their phone number and 4) write a paragraph that describes an event.49

Some states have had the luxury of extremely successful results upon implementation of the program. However, the state of Florida has been a scene of raging controversy ever since competency testing began within its school systems. In the winter of 1977, 37% of high school juniors flunked the competency test. To pass the test and be judged functionally literate, a student must display ability to apply basic skills to problems and tasks of a practical nature encountered in everyday life. One must pass 70% of the test items and demonstrate mastery in one-half of the skills. Results are indicating that students cannot answer practical problem-solving questions, but high school students can function at the eighth grade level.

Public officials are saying that it may be the greatest educational device yet, and taxpayers seem to agree. Thomas Fisher, state director of student assessment, claims that mail is 99% in favor of the program. Most of this mail has come from parents. Wayne Blanton, assistant executive director of the Florida School Boards Association, states:

The public sees the Functional Literacy Test as a way to evaluate school systems. The test identifies
weaknesses and can suggest ways to help correct these problems. It's a tool to ensure that young people go out into society with minimal competency skills. 50

Phillis Miller, chairperson of the Dade County school board, is also an avid supporter of the program. She claims the test as an indicator of student deficiencies "will be invaluable to educators planning remediation, and assures the public that students will attain a minimum level of proficiency in basic skills." 51

The Educational Accountability Act, the law that created the test, requires the tests to be diagnostic and pinpoint areas of weakness in various student skills. The intent is to improve the Florida educational system and bring sub-standard schools up to par.

However, not everybody is entirely happy with the consequences of the system, namely the teachers' unions. Pat L. Tornillo, union official says that the students are unprepared for the test. She speaks for the union when she states,

We feel that giving students who fail the test a certificate of attendance rather than a diploma is unfair, punitive, asinine, and possibly unconstitutional. Statewide figures on computation skills (based on a test administered in advance of the Functional Literacy Test, and released only days after the scores on the FLT were made public) show that many of the same Dade County students declared illiterate by the FLT had successfully mastered computation skills in algebra, geometry, and trigonometry in the earlier test. 52

Also the Florida Teaching Professionals, a state teacher union affiliate of the National Education Association, supports the intent of the test but fears the results have given local
school boards and the public another reason to downgrade the classroom teachers. They also claim there is a tremendous problem with the cost of remediation and the size of classrooms because of it.

Wayne Blanton comments on the future of the program:

The public sees this as a step in the right direction. Of course, in five years or so, if there has not been much improvement, then school boards are going to feel the pressure. But that's several years down the road.  

Where is minimal competency testing going? Where will it stop? What form will it take next? In the next few years these questions will most likely be answered. As to date, nobody knows what will happen to the movement, whether it will stay or simply die out as other educational programs have in the past. If it is to remain a part of our educational philosophy, then the states and school systems must make sure they are being utilized correctly and efficiently. Barry Beal, director of student assessment in Denver says, "You have to be careful not to abuse or misread competency tests. They have to be used to maximize benefits to students with problems that might otherwise have gone unnoticed." 54

John Ryan, president of NEA, the nation's largest teacher organization, gives his view on the use of the tests when he states, "The major use of tests should be to diagnose student difficulties, not to label or classify students." 55

Perhaps the greatest warning came from Joseph Califano, secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, when he spoke before the annual meeting of the College Entrance Examination
Board in 1977. Califano warned:

Basic competency testing will be acceptable and effective only if we stress, along with its benefits, the critical limitations and dangers of testing. First, like other methods of assessing educational achievement, tests are far from perfect. The beguiling precision of test scores disguises many difficult questions about what tests measure and how well they succeed. Tests are tools - not magic wands. Even with the most sophisticated tests, the assessment of learning will still require sensitive judgments about a child's human development. Tests can help inform such judgments; tests cannot make them.

Second, there is the issue of cultural bias. Tests can prove especially difficult for particular groups of children.

The third basic limitation on the use of tests is that they measure progress toward but a few of the myriad goals we ask our schools to pursue. Not all skills are basic skills; in focusing on minimal competency, we cannot let the minimum become the maximum. We must ensure that students of ability are given a chance to develop to the fullest and that important subjects beyond the three R's are not overlooked.

This last limitation is a clear warning against preoccupation with testing which all of us must sound to the public. The purpose of schools is not merely to produce high scores on achievement tests; it is also to educate children, to help teach them to appreciate what is worthwhile, to enable them to extract meaning from future experiences.

Many questions remain and it will be some time before we discover if minimal competency testing achieves its goal of improving education throughout the entire country. However, it is known that certain standards and guidelines must be followed in order for a competency testing program to succeed. These guidelines include:

1) A model program should provide for representative community-based participation in the decision-making process.

2) The test should not measure what the school has not taught.

3) The test and the curriculum should reflect all aspects of
our pluralistic society.

4) There must be a lengthy phase-in period which allows for curricular and instructional change and gives students notice that failure to learn can have severe consequences.

5) There should be multiple learning, evaluation, and remedial opportunity. Students who will have difficulty passing the test should receive sufficient instruction and remediation to pass the test.

6) A model program should provide for students and educators to share the responsibility for performance rather than place the burden entirely on the students.

If used improperly, minimal competency testing could result in a decrease in the quality of education, and cause administrators, teachers, employers, parents, the general public, and most of all, the students, to suffer with an even worse crisis than we now face. However, if the standards are followed and the tests are used correctly and in an effective manner, the quality of education will increase in the United States, which will benefit all citizens. Only time will tell whether minimal competency testing is simply a reaction by a frustrated public to an educational crisis, or if it is actually the long-awaited solution that will cure the decline of education in this country.
ENDNOTES

1Gloria Borger, "Is Your Child Learning Anything At School?", Parents Magazine, 53 (September 1978), 58.


3Ebel, p. 547.


6Borger, p. 58.


8Borger, p. 92.

9Pipho, "Minimal Competency Standards," p. 34.

10Borger, p. 92.


15Gilman, p. 57.

16Ebel, p. 547.

17Gilman, p. 56.


20Borger, p. 58.

22 Borger, p. 58.


24 Gallagher and Rambotham, p. 302.

25 Gallagher and Rambotham, p. 303.

26 Borger, p. 58.

27 Borger, p. 58.

28 Gilman, p. 58.


30 Gilman, p. 60.

31 Gilman, p. 60.

32 Gilman, p. 61.

33 Gilman, p. 60.


35 Gilman, p. 62.

36 Borger, p. 92.

37 McClung, p. 397.

38 McClung, p. 398.

39 McClung, p. 399.


42 Pihio, "Minimal Competency Standards," p. 35.

43 Pihio, "Minimal Competency Standards," p. 35.

44 Pihio, "Minimal Competency Standards," p. 36.

45 Gallagher and Rombotham, p. 306.
46. Gallagher and Rambotham, p. 304.
47. Borger, p. 59.
49. Borger, p. 92.
51. Deane and Walker, p. 28.
52. Deane and Walker, p. 29
53. Deane and Walker, p. 28
54. Borger, p. 58.
57. Mc Clung, p. 399.


