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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to report on the processes followed and the modifications made to the Alabama state minimum competency testing program for exceptional students, as well as to provide results for exceptional students tested through spring 1985. A committee of lay citizens and professional educators identified basic competencies in reading, mathematics, and language to be mastered by Alabama students being granted a diploma. Another group constructed test items measuring these competencies. Before being assembled into booklet form, the trial items were reviewed by a number of professionals, including persons in special education. The items were critiqued by a specialist in visual impairments, a specialist in hearing impairments, a generalist who supervised a program of comprehensive special education services, and by a full-time staff person in special education at the State Department of Education. The Special Education Task Force for Basic Competency Education determined what special accommodations should be made in the testing program for the handicapped. The final report of this task force, Basic Competency Education Regulations and Accommodations for Exceptional Students, was adapted and disseminated to all local school systems. The regulations are included in the paper, as is the list of competencies. (LMO)

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Minimum Competency Testing in Alabama: Regulations and  
Adpatations for the Handicapped

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## Minimum Competency Testing in Alabama: Regulations and Adaptations for the Handicapped

In Brookhart versus Illinois State Board of Education, the court was asked to review the propriety of the denial of high school diplomas to certain students because of their failure to pass a minimal competency test. The 11 plaintiffs were all exceptional students in a special curriculum on an individual educational plan who, though meeting other requirements for graduation, failed to pass a minimum competency test. They were denied diplomas and were tendered, instead, a certificate of program completion. Not only did the plaintiffs ask that they be given regular high school diplomas, but also they requested that minimum competency tests not be used unless modified for the handicapped.

This request via the courts in Illinois seems reasonable enough. Yet, even though the passing of minimum competency tests has become a prerequisite for the issuance of a high school diploma in state after state throughout the country, little has been done to date to effect in a considered manner the modifications needed for exceptional students.

In Alabama, adaptations have been made in the state minimum competency testing program for exceptional students. The purpose of this paper is to report on the processes followed and modifications made as well as to provide results for exceptional students tested through spring, 1985, with the Alabama High School Graduation Examination (AHSGE).

### Method

#### Test Development

A committee of lay citizens and professional educators identified basic competencies in reading, mathematics, and language to be mastered by Alabama

students before being granted a diploma. Exceptional students were included. These competencies are given in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

Another group, also composed of lay citizens and professional educators including measurement specialists, constructed test items measuring these competencies. Before being assembled into booklet form, the trial items were reviewed by a number of groups including persons in special education. In a general review, the items were critiqued by a specialist in visual impairments, a specialist in hearing impairments, and a generalist who supervised a program of comprehensive special education services. These persons were in addition to the full-time staff person in special education at the State Department of Education (SDE) who also reviewed the items.

In a review for biases, the items were critiqued by a minority review committee. Included on this committee was a person who had knowledge of and experience in working with exceptional students.

All test items were also reviewed by a Task Force/Vision Impaired and a Task Force/Hearing Impaired. Members of the Task Force/Vision Impaired included teachers from public school programs for the vision impaired, representatives from the Alabama Institute for the Deaf and Blind, and SDE personnel with expertise in the area of sensory impairments. Also serving with this Task Force were two consultants from the American Printing House for the Blind in Louisville, Kentucky. Members of the Task Force/Hearing Impaired included teachers from public school programs for the hearing impaired, representatives from the Alabama Institute for the Deaf and Blind, and SDE personnel with expertise in the area of sensory impairments. Serving with the Task Force/Hearing Impaired was a consultant from the Center for Assessment of Demographic Studies, Gallaudet College, Washington,

D.C. Items judged acceptable through all reviews were assembled into respective reading, mathematics, and language subtests of the AHSGE. There was a total of 80 items on the reading subtest, 95 items on the mathematics subtest, and 119 items on the language subtest. The number of items measuring each competency area is given in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

For the vision impaired, the AHSGE was produced in braille and large print. For this production the SDE specialist in vision impaired and the special education specialist assigned to the basic competency education section traveled to the American Printing House for the Blind to proof final copy of the graduation examination.

There was no need for a special format edition of the AHSGE for the hearing impaired as the regular print edition incorporated suggested editorial changes made by the members of the Task Force/Hearing Impaired. Test directions for the AHSGE were minimal so that there was a need only for minor word changes to make the directions acceptable for the hearing impaired population. No further modifications were needed for the other exceptionalities.

#### Regulations and Accommodations

To ensure that consideration be given in Alabama's minimum competency testing program to exceptional students, the State Superintendent of Education appointed the Special Education Task Force for Basic Competency Education. This Task Force was composed of approximately 30 persons from institutions of higher education, local education agencies, advocacy groups, and the SDE. All categories of exceptionalities recognized by the SDE were represented.

The group was given the charge of determining what special accommodations should be made in the minimum competency testing program for the handicapped.

The final report of this task force, Basic Competency Education Regulations and Accommodations for Exceptional Students, was adopted by the State Board of Education and disseminated to all local school systems. Regulations and accommodations are as follows:

Regulation 1. All exceptional students must have the opportunity to participate in the existing Alabama Basic Competency Education testing program as well as to earn the necessary Carnegie units to meet high school graduation requirements as listed in the brochure, High School Graduation Requirements.

The AHSGE and Basic Competency Tests (BCT) given as checkpoints at grades 3, 6, and 9 are the components of Alabama's total minimum competency testing program. Regulation 1 indicates that LEAs cannot exclude exceptional students from taking the BCT or the AHSGE nor from earning Carnegie units, if the exclusion is based solely upon a handicapping condition, no matter how severe the handicap. Consideration of whether or not an exceptional student should attempt a BCT or the AHSGE must be made on an individual basis by the IEP Committee which develops that student's total educational program.

In Regulation 1 "opportunity to participate" does not necessarily mean that all exceptional students will take the BCT or the AHSGE. There are, for example, some exceptional students for whom an academic program including the basic competencies may not be appropriate. If the IEP Committee determines from all available data, including but not limited to

assessment data and teacher evaluations, that the education program for the student should not include instruction in the basic competencies, then the student should not be a candidate to take a BCT or the AHSGE. This decision must be reviewed on an annual basis, or more often as required, and such exceptions must be documented fully in the student's IEP.

Regulation 2. In administering the Basic Competency Tests (BCT) and the Alabama High School Graduation Examination (AHSGE) appropriate accommodations will be made to ensure that each exceptional student receives individual consideration of his or her handicap without changing the nature, content, or integrity of the test.

All of the accommodations approved by the Alabama State Board of Education appear in a checklist format in Basic Competency Education Regulations and Accommodations for Exceptional Students. Accommodations may include:

Scheduling accommodations: Tests may be administered

- \_\_\_ at a time of day most beneficial to the student;
- \_\_\_ in periods of \_\_\_ minutes followed by rest breaks of \_\_\_ minutes;
- \_\_\_ until, in the administrator's judgment, the student can no longer sustain the activity due to physical disability or limited attention span;
- \_\_\_ other.

Setting accommodations: Tests may be administered

- \_\_\_ in a small group;
- \_\_\_ in a carrel;
- \_\_\_ in the special education classroom;

- at the student's home;
- with the student seated in front of the classroom;
- with the teacher facing the student;
- by the student's special education teacher;
- using an interpreter to further explain oral directions;
- individually;
- other.

Format and/or equipment accommodations: Tests may be administered with format and/or equipment modifications such as

- large print;
- braille;
- the student using magnifying equipment;
- the student using amplification equipment such a hearing aid or auditory trainer;
- the student wearing noise buffers;
- templates and/or graph paper;
- other.

Recording accommodations:

- Student will mark answers in test booklets.
- Student's answers will be recorded by proctor or assistant.
- Students will mark answers by machine.
- other.

Any one or any combination of the accommodations may be determined to be needed for an individual exceptional student. However, if accommodations other than those listed are necessary to meet the unique needs of a handicapped student, use of such accommodations must be requested by the



LEA and must be approved in writing by the SDE staff in the Basic Competency Education Section prior to the administration of a BCT or AHSGE. This requirement pertains to any accommodation the committee members may list under the "other" category. Reading a portion of the test to exceptional students will not be approved.

The IEP Committee must keep in mind that the intent of Regulation 2 is to accommodate the handicap(s) of the student, not to make the test itself or the test-taking process easier. The IEP Committee is professionally and personally responsible for determining accommodations which are appropriate without being excessive or too minimal.

In considering accommodations for a BCT or the AHSGE, the IEP Committee should consider what is practiced daily in the classroom and/or on standardized tests. This consideration appears to be a good beginning point for determining appropriate accommodations.

Regulation 3. All decisions regarding basic competency tests must be made on an individual basis and will be justified and documented in the IEP.

Preparation of an IEP is a process required for each exceptional student receiving special education services. Regulation 3 indicates that since the IEP process is the one which is utilized to make decisions regarding exceptional student participation in the BCE program, it should also be the vehicle for making all decisions regarding a BCT or the AHSGE. The IEP Committee must take seriously the concept of individual consideration, and each committee member must participate in decisions related to the administration of a BCT or the AHSGE.

One procedure growing out of Regulation 3 needs to be emphasized. If any accommodations are recommended for an exceptional student who takes a

BCT or the AHSGE, the completed accommodation sheet must be a part of that student's IEP for any year he/she would take a test. Each member of the IEP Committee must sign the accommodation sheet or indicate a minority report of any disagreement.

Regulation 4. If the IEP Committee determines from all available data, including but not limited to assessment data and teacher evaluation, that the education program for the student should not include instruction in the competencies listed in Minimum Standards and Competencies (Reading, Language, Mathematics) for Alabama Schools, 1982 Edition, then the student should not be required to take the AHSGE. This decision must be reviewed on an annual basis or more often as required, and such exemptions must be documented in the student's IEP. Nothing contained herein should be understood as suggesting that a student should not have the opportunity to attempt the test.

See discussion under Regulation 1.

Regulation 5. Exceptional students who participate in the BCE testing program must be given practice in taking tests similar in format and content to the BCT and AHSGE prior to participation in any part of the program.

Regulation 5 does not necessarily refer to the giving of tests which have been purchased. Although such practice could serve as a partial fulfillment of the regulation, the original intent is to provide these test-taking skills within the everyday instructional program. Activities which teachers may emphasize when giving daily tests that should facilitate standardized test taking include:

1. Presenting varied directions during daily classroom tests;

2. Timing the daily test--general parameters followed by specific time;
3. Requiring answers to be recorded on a separate sheet and moving to a final step of requiring the gridding or "bubbling" of daily test answers on pages similar to BCT or AHSGE answer sheets;
4. Teaching management of separate test booklet and answer sheet;
5. Teaching problem solving techniques such as estimation of answers in mathematics;
6. Teaching anxiety control with activities such as relaxation techniques and positive reinforcement; and
7. Exhibiting enthusiasm for testing as a learning experience.

Regulation 6. For an exceptional student who will participate in the BCE program, the IEP Committee must decide whether any special test accommodations must be made. None or any number of the accommodations listed in the State Department of Education Regulations and Accommodations for Exceptional Students may be appropriate; this should be determined on an individual basis by the IEP Committee.

See discussion under Regulation 2.

Regulation 7. Exceptional students who do not take or fail to pass the AHSGE must be treated the same as regular students. It will be the responsibility of the LEA to notify students and parents of the consequences of not taking or of failing the test.

A resolution F-8 by the Alabama State Board of Education dated February 10, 1983, mandated that the local boards of education issue a diploma to all students who have passed, according to standards established by the State Board of Education, all three subject tests--reading, language,

and mathematics--of the AHSGE and have fulfilled state and local requirements regarding Carnegie units. The resolution further stipulated that LEAs are responsible for informing the students/parents of deficiencies indicated by the results of the AHSGE. Students served in special education programs are included under this resolution.

Another requirement which applies to exceptional students as well as regular students is that of informing parents and students of the requirements for graduation. For exceptional students this process should begin prior to the years spent in secondary programs and continue through the completion of such programs. In addition to counseling/discussions during any and all IEP meetings, the LEA must disseminate the brochure entitled High School Graduation Requirements to each exceptional student. As is true for regular students, the brochure is disseminated in the fall of the ninth grade or as soon as the student enrolls following the ninth grade. The student and one parent are required to sign a portion of the brochure and return it to be filed in the student's cumulative folder.

Regulation 8. Exceptional students must have the same opportunity for remediation as regular students. All remediation efforts will be documented in the IEP.

The Alabama State Board resolution F-8 of February 10, 1983, delegated to the local education agencies the responsibility for ensuring that students receive remediation for deficiencies as indicated by results of the AHSGE. Again, this stipulation includes students who are enrolled in special education programs.

Remediation may be a part of the special education program offerings, or it may include the participation of some exceptional students in

remediation courses planned for regular students. Whatever is planned by the LEA for the remediation program must include exceptional students who have remediation activities as a part of their IEP. Also, all remediation efforts must be documented in the IEP.

Regulation 9. Implementation of the administrative requirements of these regulations shall be accomplished according to a schedule adopted and approved by the State Superintendent of Education.

Alabama's BCE program, which includes AHSGE, operates at the discretion of the Alabama State Board of Education and is directed by the State Superintendent of Education. There is no legislative mandate.

### Procedure

The Alabama High School Graduation Examination was administered for the first time in the fall of 1983 to incoming 11th grade students. It was administered again in the spring of 1984 and each subsequent fall and spring thereafter. Students thus have four opportunities to pass the test before being denied a diploma.

A technical advisory committee composed of SDE personnel assigned to the basic competency testing program and measurement specialists from universities in Alabama recommended the pass-fail cut scores which were adopted by the State Board of Education. Theoretical, empirical, and judgmental procedures were used in the process. The minimum passing points were determined to be 79% for reading, 65% for mathematics, and 77% for language.

Exceptional student not only took the same AHSGE as those students not identified as exceptional, but also they had to obtain the same minimum scores in order to pass. The answer documents for all exceptional students were processed the same as for all other students. Exceptional students for whom the accommodation of marking answers directly in a test booklet has been approved were no exceptions. Their answers were transposed to regular answer documents for scoring. The SDE regulated the process for transposing these answers in order to minimize human error as much as possible and to build credibility in the answers marked as the work of the student for whom the answer document was filed.

### Results

Results for all exceptional students tested during the first four administrations of the AHSGE are reported in Tables 4, 5, 6, and 7.

Exceptional students included are those identified and receiving services in accordance with PL 94-142 and Alabama Acts 106 and 688 as being mentally retarded, educable mentally retarded, trainable mentally retarded, hard of hearing, deaf, blind, vision impaired, emotionally conflicted, orthopedically impaired, other health impaired, multihandicapped, and specific learning disabilities.

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 Insert Tables 4, 5, 6, and 7 about here  
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As can be seen in these tables, a substantial number of exceptional students are attempting the AHSGE and many of them are passing.

For the 1985 class, including the exceptional students, 98.03% of the students passed the reading subtest, 97.10% passed the mathematics subtest, and 96.89% passed the language subtest. A total of 95.73% of the seniors passed all three areas (reading, mathematics, language) of the AHSGE.

Passing rates calculated on a statewide basis with scores of exceptional children excluded were 99.54% for reading, 98.98% for mathematics, and 98.96% for language. Passing all three areas was 98.37% of these students.

Approximately 1,800 students from the senior class of 1985 have failed one or more subtests of the AHSGE. Of these, approximately 1,150 were enrolled in special education classes, and 650 were served in regular class programs. Some of these same students would not have graduated even if they had passed the AHSGE because they did not have the required Carnegie units.

### Conclusion

The movement to establish minimum competencies to be mastered before the receipt of a high school diploma by Alabama students and to develop the instruments to assess these competencies has been a task undertaken by persons representative of all citizens in Alabama. Efforts have been made to include the exceptional students in the same manner as prescribed for the typical students. Appropriate persons representative of the professionals serving the field of exceptional child education, as well as members of the exceptional population, have made the decisions regarding exceptional students in the basic competency testing program at grades 3, 6, and 9 and the AHSGE.

During all phases of the minimum competency program in Alabama the welfare of the student has been the primary consideration. All procedures used are technically sound and allow all students an equal opportunity to demonstrate the competencies that are represented on the BCT and the AHSGE. From the various exceptionalities, students are participating in the basic competency testing program. Many are demonstrating mastery and graduating with a diploma.



Table 1Reading Competencies Measured by the AHSGE

Competency	Number of Items Measuring Competency
Associate selected written words and phrases which occur in daily life situations with their literal meanings; recognize and use various forms and application blanks used in everyday life.	8
Determine word meaning using specific context clues.	5
Determine word meanings from a knowledge of prefixes and suffixes.	4
Recognize common abbreviations and symbols.	4
Use alphabetical organization to locate information needed.	6
Select appropriate reference sources in a given situation.	4
Know the uses of the different sections of a book.	4
Know the uses of the different sections of the newspaper.	4
Determine the main idea in a passage.	5
Find details in a written passage.	5
Use maps, graphs, charts, and tables.	6

(table continues)

Table 1 (continued)

Competency	Number of Items Measuring Competency
Determine main idea and detail from selected materials on government, law, money management, health, and nutrition.	9
Read for information from materials such as advertisements, yellow pages, labels, directories, and catalogs.	6
Follow directions and instructions.	6
Distinguish fact from fiction.	4
Total	80

Table 2Mathematics Competencies Measured by the AHSGE

Competency	Number of Items Measuring Competency
Read and write numerals and word names for numbers.	3
Compare decimals; compare fractions with unlike denominators.	2
Add, subtract, multiply, and divide whole numbers.	6
Add, subtract, multiply, and divide decimals.	7
Add, subtract, and multiply fractions.	6
Change percents to decimals and decimals to percents.	3
Determine discounts, down payments, commissions, taxes, ratios, and percents.	4
Convert fractions to decimals and decimals to fractions.	4
Find averages of whole numbers and decimal numbers.	3
Change units of measure.	4
Solve problems involving time.	3
Measure distance by use of a ruler.	4
Measure capacities.	3
Find perimeters.	4
Find rectangular areas.	4

(table continues)

Table 2 (continued)

Competency	Number of Items Measuring Competency
Read and interpret graphs.	2
Read and interpret tables and charts.	2
Interpret scale drawings.	3
Make approximations by rounding numbers.	3
Recognize simple plane geometric figures, parallel and perpendicular lines.	4
Determine change.	2
Use comparative shopping skills.	2
Compare the cost of cash and credit purchases.	2
Allocate time and money.	3
Complete checks and money orders.	3
Solve rate, time, distance problems.	4
Compute salaries and wages.	4
Total	95

Table 3Language Competencies Measured by the AHSGE

Competency	Number of Items Measuring Competency
Observe pronoun-antecedent agreement.	9
Use correct forms of nouns and verbs.	15
List ideas in sequential order.	5
Arrange sentences into a logically organized paragraph.	9
Arrange written directions in logical order.	4
Include in a message or request all necessary information (who, what, when, where, how, or why).	4
Determine what information is missing from a message, an announcement, or a process explanation or what information is irrelevant.	4
Identify proper format of a business letter.	9
Identify the proper format of a friendly letter (social correspondence).	8
Complete a common form such as a driver's license application, change of address form.	9
Identify words frequently used in daily activities.	9

(table continues)

Table 3 (continued)

Competency	Number of Items Measuring Competency
Identify question marks, periods, and exclamation points to punctuate sentences.	16
Identify quotation marks to set off a direct quotation.	4
Identify the colon after "the following" and "as follows," the salutation of a business letter, and the hour in numerals.	4
Identify the capitalization of the first word in every sentence, the pronoun <u>I</u> , and proper nouns.	10
Total	119

Table 4

Performance on the AHSGE by Exceptionality: Fall, 1983

Exceptionality	Total Number	Total Number Passing		
	Attempting Test	Reading	Mathematics	Language
Educable Mentally Retarded	2,016	349	172	135
Trainable Mentally Retarded	19	4	4	4
Hard of Hearing	11	10	7	9
Deaf	13	6	7	4
Blind	1	1	1	1
Vision Impaired	20	18	16	13
Emotionally Conflicted	78	56	48	35
Orthopedically Impaired	8	7	4	6
Other Health Impairments	9	9	8	7
Multihandicapped	5	5	3	4
Specific Learning Disability	1,104	789	627	401

Table 5Performance on the AHSGE by Exceptionality: Spring, 1984

Exceptionality	Total Number	<u>Total Number Passing</u>		
	Attempting Test	Reading	Mathematics	Language
Educable Mentally Retarded	1,490	248		
	1,657		192	
	1,705			155
Trainable Mentally Retarded	16	0		
	20		1	
	20			1
Hard of Hearing	2	0		
	5		3	
	3			0
Deaf	5	0		
	5		0	
	5			0
Blind	0			
Vision Impaired	3	1		
	6		1	
	9			5
Emotionally Conflicted	26	14		
	34		10	
	37			12

(table continues)



Table 5 (continued)

Exceptionality	Total Number Attempting Test	<u>Total Number Passing</u>		
		Reading	Mathematics	Language
Orthopedically Impaired	3	3		
	7		1	
	6			3
Other Health Impairments	3	1		
	3		1	
	6			2
Multihandicapped	0	0		
	1		0	
	0			0
Specific Learning Disability	317	150		
	461		205	
	694			274

Table 6Performance on the AHSGE by Exceptionality: Fall, 1984

Exceptionality	Total Number	<u>Total Number Passing</u>		
	Attempting Test	Reading	Mathematics	Language
Educable Mentally Retarded	2,779	532		
	2,968		280	
	3,065			264
Trainable Mentally Retarded	30	4		
	32		4	
	32			5
Hard of Hearing	14	8		
	15		9	
	16			8
Deaf	16	11		
	15		9	
	16			9
Blind	1	0		
	1		0	
	1			0
Vision Impaired	19	16		
	21		16	
	18			14

(table continues)

Table 6 (continued)

Exceptionality	Total Number	<u>Total Number Passing</u>		
	Attempting Test	Reading	Mathematics	Language
Emotionally Conflicted	76	53		
	80		42	
	83			44
Orthopedically Impaired	5	4		
	7		2	
	6			3
Other Health Impairments	9	7		
	9		6	
	9			5
Multihandicapped	0	0		
	2		2	
	1			1
Specific Learning Disability	1,296	965		
	1,394		928	
	1,512			705

Table 7Performance on the AHSGE by Exceptionality: Spring, 1985

Exceptionality	Total Number	Total Number Passing		
	Attempting Test	Reading	Mathematics	Language
Educable Mentally Retarded	2,024	378		
	2,438		464	
	2,514			402
Trainable Mentally Retarded	27	0		
	27		0	
	27			0
Hard of Hearing	8	4		
	8		3	
	10			3
Deaf	6	1		
	6		2	
	7			2
Blind	0			
	4	3		
	7		5	
Vision Impaired	6			4
	36	27		
	52		26	
Emotionally Conflicted	52			21

(table continues)

Table 7 (continued)

Exceptionality	Total Number	Total Number Passing		
	Attempting Test	Reading	Mathematics	Language
Orthopedically Impaired	1	1		
	5		2	
	4			4
Other Health Impairments	1	0		
	1		0	
	4			2
Multihandicapped	2	1		
	4		3	
	4			2
Specific Learning Disability	347	156		
	586		289	
	837			413