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AUTHOR Corcoran, Thomas B.
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ABSTRACT

Issues surrounding the statewide competency testing of at-risk students are discussed. Sanctions, such as negative evaluations of educational programs associated with such tests, used to fall most heavily on schools and staff, but tests are increasingly becoming prerequisites for promotion and graduation, with increasing impact on students. Proponents of competency tests believe that they will motivate students, bring much-needed educational reform, and stimulate general improvements and public support for the public schools. The most serious issues include: the effects of testing on the achievement of students who are at risk and on the dropout rate; the effects of such tests on curricula; the effects of such testing on the teaching profession; and the impact of the tests on public support for education. Empirical evidence about these concerns is not widely available but several conclusions can be drawn: (1) such tests are here to stay; (2) tests will not resolve the issues of equity that still plague public education because these are political issues; (3) there may, in fact, be associated with the use of tests serious effects that must be monitored. The solutions to these problems appear to lie, not in less testing, but in more and better testing to yield accountability and motivation effects without curricular distortion. (SLD)

# Competency Testing and At-Risk Youth



Thomas B. Corcoran

Research for Better Schools

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444 North Third Street
Philadelphia, PA 19123

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In the past decade, one of the most powerful and most controversial tools for educational improvement has been the introduction of competency testing in the basic skills. While competency tests have been introduced by both local school districts and state government, the trend has been toward the development of statewide testing programs. By 1984, forty states, including three of the four states in the mid-Atlantic region*, had adopted such programs. Many of these competency testing programs were originally developed as part of accountability programs in the early 1970s, but the expansion and strengthening of state testing programs has become a central feature of the current reform agenda.

Growing concern about the quality of public education and the impetus toward higher standards generated by the reform reports is leading to changes in the purposes of competency testing. The tests, particularly those administered by the states, have been intended to stimulate improvements in public education. These testing programs typically were designed to reduce the number of students lacking essential skills by ensuring that those skills were more effectively taught and that remediation was provided where necessary.

During the past few years, however, the functions of state testing have been shifting from the allocation of remedial funds and the evaluation of schools to the certification of achievement and the elevation of academic standards. Instead of just serving to identify students in need of

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*The mid-Atlantic region includes Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

assistance, the tests increasingly are being used as prerequisites for promotion and graduation. Whereas the sanctions associated with the tests used to fall most heavily on schools and their staffs, they now fall equally heavily on the students themselves. Over twenty states now use competency tests as requirements for graduation from high school and the number is expected to increase.

Furthermore, in some states, such as New Jersey, minimum competency tests (MCTs) initially developed for the purposes of ensuring basic skills competency have been criticized as being too easy and they are being revised to reflect the higher standards of the "excellence movement." Writing samples, more complex mathematics problems, and more demanding reading and language arts sections are being added to the tests in order to incorporate higher-order skills as reformers seek to raise academic standards in the public schools.

Competency tests now are being used to foster excellence as well as equity and the tensions between those two agendas have brought increasing controversy over their content and functions. Policy-makers defend the development of more difficult tests as a necessary step in the struggle to restore the value of the high school diploma. Reformers who once sought the introduction of such tests to protect the interests of students whose needs were being neglected now are raising questions about their fairness and their impact on educational programs.

The purpose of this brief paper is to examine both sides of the argument over the potential effects of these new graduation tests on "at-risk" youth, the poor and minority students who have not achieved well

in the past and students attending school in low-achieving and low-spending districts.* The arguments of both the advocates of the tests and their critics will be examined. However, a full appraisal of the impact of statewide competency tests cannot be made here. There simply is too little evidence at hand to determine whether the tests will fulfill the promises of higher standards and greater achievement made by their proponents or whether they will lead instead to the problems predicted by their opponents, increased drop-out rates, a narrower curriculum, and a focus on minimum skills.

It is curious and somewhat disturbing that policies that promise to wield such potential influence over the character and quality of public education have not been subjected to the kind of systematic and rigorous evaluations often required in the past for minor innovations in the school. But the lack of hard evidence has little effect on the claims made by participants in the debate. There is a vast and growing literature on competency testing that is largely speculative and often polemical in tone. The intended contribution of this paper is simply to identify, and possibly clarify, the issues that should be considered if the negative effects of competency testing on "at-risk" youth are to be avoided or minimized, and to prepare some direction for their future development.

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*The the National Coalition of Advocates for Students (1985) defines "at-risk" as those "whose learning is hampered by schools serve them adequately by expectations on the part of educators; that they will not or cannot succeed; by denial of access to special needs programs; by fiscal policies that limit educational services; and by inattention to the difficulties young people face in moving from school to work" (p. iv). This paper takes a narrower view, defining "at-risk" youth as those likely to be denied a diploma due to efforts to raise academic standards.

State Testing in the Mid-Atlantic Region

New Jersey was the first state in the region to implement an MCT program with the introduction of the Minimum Basic Skills Test in 1977. The initial results on the basic reading and mathematics tests administered in grades 3, 6, 9, and 11 were a shock to the public and the profession. Urban districts, in particular, had low passing rates. However, after the initial two years, the test scores have steadily improved as districts made curriculum revisions and focused more intensively on the skills being tested. Passing the MBS test became a prerequisite for graduation in 1982 (the class of 1985). A new and more difficult test, the High School Proficiency Test (HSPT), has been introduced and will replace the MBS test for the class of 1989. The HSPT includes a writing sample and more higherorder items in reading and math. The development in New Jersey may represent a pattern in the evolution of competency testing that will be repeated elsewhere. Once the tests are in place, it is easy and natural to use them to certify the accomplishments of students.

The Maryland Functional Testing program also was launched in 1977 and a 9th grade reading test has been used as a graduation requirement since 1982. Additional tests in math and writing will take effect for the class of 1987 and a test of citizenship will be added for the class of 1988. The passing rate in reading has risen to 93 percent statewide but the passing rates on the recently introduced math and writing tests are much lower.

Pennsylvania administered its new Test of Essential Learning and Literacy Skills (TELLS) in the fall of 1984. The test, administered in grades 3, 5, and 8, includes reading, language arts, and mathematics. The TELLS is similar in function and content to the original MBS test in

New Jersey and is used to determine remedial needs and to allocate state compensatory funds. Pennsylvania's earlier state test, the Educational Quality Assessment, was broader in scope and administered only to a sample of students.

Finally, Delaware has no MCT program. The state does administer the California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) in selected grades but it is not used to formally evaluate schools or students. Delaware has defined minimum competencies to be mastered by each student by the 9th grade but mastery is verified by the local district rather than through a state test.

## Issues and Arguments

Proponents of statewide competency tests, especially those who support their use as graduation tests, typically assume that:

- the critical academic outcomes of education can be assessed by objectively scored tests;
- current academic standards are too low;
- higher standards will produce greater effort by staff and students;
- greater effort and focus will produce greater achievement;
- staff know or can learn how to teach the critical skills to all or almost all students;
- the relationship between standards and effort and effort and achievement holds for all students;
- the value of the diploma will be enhanced if it is based on a known standard of performance; and
- there are no significant negative effects associated with the policies.

The proponents believe that the testing programs will motivate students, will bring much needed curricular reform, and will stimulate general

improvements in the public schools. They further contend that the availability of good information about the outcomes of public education will in the long-run lead to increased public support for the schools.

Critics challenge these assumptions. They contend that fiscal inequities and inadequate resources are greater problems than low standards and that the new tests are unfair and punitive to low-income and minority students who tend to be concentrated in districts suffering from severe resource limitations. They further contend that the tests are having a narrowing effect on the curriculum in these same districts due to pressures to improve test scores and to provide additional remediation. Critics predict higher drop-out rates as students experience failure on the tests and become discouraged. Intensive basic skills remediation, they argue, only serves to make school less interesting and may actually reduce student motivation and effort. And, finally, they contend that public reactions to the test scores are likely to scapegoat students and teachers in schools serving the "at-risk" population, thus blaming the victims of unequal distributions of educational resources and further weakening public support for resolutions of the resource problem.

These arguments against the tests are often presented with greatest vigor by special interest groups, such as teacher organizations, that are viewed as benefiting from reduced public accountability. As a consequence, their arguments are often discounted by policy-makers responding to public demands for higher standards.

The most serious issues in this debate over competency testing are:

- the effects of testing on the achievement of at-risk students and hence on the drop-out rate;

- the effects of the tests on the curriculum in the public schools, on curricular differences in schools serving different income groups, and on the locus of curricular decisions;
- the effects of testing on the teaching profession; and
- the impact of the tests on public support for public education, particularly for those public schools serving low-income and low-achieving populations.

The remainder of this paper examines the arguments and the evidence surrounding these four issues.

## Competency Tests and Low-Achieving Youth

In its recent report, the National Coalition of Advocates for Students (1985) called upon state and local policy-makers to eliminate inappropriate testing procedures as a basis for making educational decisions and suggested that the states re-examine mandated testing programs in view of their impact on the most vulnerable students. The authors of the NCAS report recommended that all state testing programs be monitored and that additional resources be provided for students denied promotion or graduation due to the tests (NCAS, 1985). Even some supporters of competency testing have expressed concern that the tests may be proven to be "stringent sanctions" when used as graduation standards (Popham, Cruse, Rankin, Sandifer, & Williams, 1985). Other advocates counter that "at-risk" students are not helped when they experience low standards and receive meaningless diplomas. They point out that tens of thousands of students are receiving remediation as a result of the state testing programs, students whose needs probably would have been neglected without the tests.

Which view is correct? Will the tests protect the most vulnerable students or harm them? What will be the consequences of the tests for the educational attainments of "at-risk" youth? First, there is no comprehensive data available that permit a full examination of these issues. The partial data that are available show that minority students score lower on statewide competency tests than white students. Serow (1984) reviewed data from four states and found a gap of 10-20 percent in reading scores and a gap of 20-40 percent in math scores. Similar differences have been noted in the mid-Atlantic states (RBS, 1985). And district-by-district analysis shows a strong relationship between mean test scores and the socio-economic level of the school population. So poor and minority students do score lower on the tests, often by substantial margins.

However, in every documented case, performance on the tests has improved over time and the racial and social gaps, while continuing to be significant, have been reduced. These improvements are likely the results of changes in curriculum and teaching and public pressure to improve performance. There may be significant costs associated with these gains, however, which will be discussed below. Given the inadequacy of the available data, all that can be concluded is that more careful monitoring of the relationship of race, ethnicity, Socio-Economic-Status (SES), and test performance is needed.

Clearly, the tests hold greater significance for low-achieving students and these students come, disproportionately, from poor and minority families. Dorr-Bremme and Herman (1984) report that their national survey of assessment practices found that principals of low SES schools reported the tests have more impact and broader consequences on school programs and

practices than principals of schools serving more affluent students. Poor performance on the tests leads to more remediation and affects student assignments, often increasing tracking (Dorr-Bremme & Herman, 1984). The time devoted to remediation may deny students access to vocational programs or other electives that have motivating power. The content of the remediation may be dull and repetitive, and may serve to offset or reduce the student's motivation to attain the diploma. In short, remediation may push students out of school. These are concerns that cannot be documented at present except anecdotally and they should be investigated.

One major contention of critics is that poor performance on the tests will lead to increases in drop-outs among poor and minority students. There is no data available to directly test this hypothesis. However, it is known that the major cause of school drop-outs is academic failure (McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1985). Furthermore, drop-out rates for poor and minority youth already are much higher than those for the general school population and there is some evidence that they have been rising in recent years after decades of decline. For example, census data show that the proportion of high school graduates among blacks in the 18-21 age cohort declined from 1982 to 1983. Whether this is due to competency testing or other factors cannot be determined, but as academic failure is the primary cause of dropping out of school, it would seem logical to assume that the experience of failure on the tests would produce an increase in drop-outs. Such an increase has been predicted by most observers in New Jersey, where the graduation test has been made more difficult.

Clearly, there is cause to be concerned about any policy or program that would push more students out of school in the current environment.

Drop-outs from high school face an increasingly hostile labor market in which the high school diploma serves as an important screening device for employers. Even the military is increasingly reluctant to take in volunteers who lack a diploma and, in any case, requires them to pass a basic skills test. Standards for admission to higher education are being raised, closing off options for students who do not succeed in high school. In the 1980s, the student who fails to attain a high school diploma faces a future full of risk.

## The Impact of Testing on Curriculum

The NCAS report expresses concern about a narrowing of the school curriculum as a result of overemphasis on basic skills testing. "All children also suffer when testing narrows the content of curriculum and promotes teaching to the test" (p. 47). Do state competency tests narrow the curriculum? The answer seems clearly in the affirmative. Teachers report an increased emphasis on the basic skills and they report that more time and attention are given to the subject matter covered by the tests (Dorr-Bremme & Herman, 1984). Clearly, the tests affect the scope and sequence of curriculum and the time allocations defined by local boards of education (Resnick & Resnick, 1985). And state departments of education who administer the tests often provide skill arrays, materials, and teacher training designed to alter the local curricula. Many state policy-makers view the tests as devices to alter indirectly what they cannot change directly due to traditions of home rule in public education. Curricular changes are, in fact, legally required when passing the test is a requirement for graduation; the Debra P. vs. Turlington case in Florida stated

that all districts must provide reasonable opportunities for students to learn material that is on such tests.

Are these changes always bad? The advocates of testing would argue not, pointing to the value of increased curricular focus, to the motivating power of the tests, and to the increased guarantee that essential skills are adequately covered. Many educators apparently subscribe to this view and only 25 percent of the teachers surveyed by the UCLA Center for the Study of Education reported that the tests detracted from the overall quality of the educational program (Dorr-Bremme & Herman, 1984).

Should teachers teach to the tests? Some proponents of competency testing contend that unless a test can be studied for, it cannot serve as an incentive for harder work by staff and students. They say that there has been too much emphasis on using tests to evaluate schools and not enough on monitoring the performance of students and that this has undercut the motivating power of testing (Resnick & Resnick, 1985). According to this view, unless the tests can be taught to and studied for, they cannot provide useful incentives to staff and students and cannot provide useful feedback to shape the curriculum. Therefore, the effectiveness of the tests depends upon their power to affect local curriculum and it is right and proper for teachers to teach to the tests.

It is difficult to disagree with these arguments. The issues here are more matters of the degree of curricular focus that is desirable, the variability of that impact for different student populations, and the manner in which such curricular decisions should be made. If the emphasis on passing the test leads to reallocations of time to basic skills instruction and remediation of such a magnitude that other important subjects such as

science, social studies, art, and music lose their place in the curriculum, then there is clearly a problem. However, the problem may be less with the tests themselves than with the response of local educators to the tests. There is anecdotal evidence of such problems in elementary schools in the urban districts of New Jersey where the necessity to raise test scores (in order to achieve state certification) and inadequate resources have combined to create an imbalanced curriculum. Such problems are unlikely to occur in affluent districts where the number of test failures is low and therefore there is less pressure on the curriculum.

Clearly the tests are forcing decisions about curriculum and state policy makers perceive the tests as catalysts to improve curriculum and instruction (Popham et al., 1985). They provide a cheap way of driving the system and they move the locus of power from local authorities to the state bureaucracies (Salganik, 1985; Wise, 1979). The agency that controls the test controls the curriculum through the sanctions associated with denial of diplomas and public release of the scores. The past examinations and the skills arrays of the state increasingly define the local curriculum. The public does not understand this issue as evidenced in their simultaneous support for a national high school graduation test and for local control of schools in the 1984 Gallup poll (Salganik, 1985). Greater centralization of control and increased reliance on technical rationality are at variance with the public's views on educational governance but this is the drift of current policy nevertheless. There is a risk that local control over schools may seriously erode before the public becomes fully aware of the shifts that are occurring.

Moreover, the existence of the state test scores may lead state officials to assume more responsibility for the schools, to feel responsible and obliged to act to solve school problems and, if necessary, to make curricular policy directly. The tests weaken the authority of professionals and erode local control over education, creating a vacuum in which the state must assume greater responsibility and must act.

So instead of the curriculum shaping the tests, the tests are driving curricular reform -- at least in some states and in some districts. However, few would deny the need for such reform. Even the NCAS report recognizes the current inadequacies and inequities:

> "Some schools offer a level of education that is so inferior that significant numbers of students are not learning even the most basic skills. Students are told they are learning English or history or science. But what is taught in these subject areas in some classrooms bears little relationship to what is taught in the same subject areas in other classrooms. For many low income and minority students the curriculum itself is minimal and teachers often expect little. (1985, p. 50)

Other observers note the variations in courses of the same titles (Resnick & Resnick, 1985), work demands (Natriello & Dornbusch, 1984), and expectations (Good, 1982).

The issue is not whether the curriculum of the public schools should be reformed, but who should make these determinations. There is curricular revolution underway and it occurring with little public debate. The introduction of practical, skill-oriented content in the basics may actually drive out rigorous academic content and serve to lower standards in the long-run. The argument that minimums become maximums describes a risk associated with any graduation test, not just minimum basic skills tests. There are important curricular issues to be discussed and major policy

decisions to be made in order to bring some sense of order to the chaos that characterizes the curriculum of American public education. Should there be a core curriculum? What should be the role of general education? Of vocational education? Should there be only one standard and one diploma?

These and related issues are too important to be left to the developers of tests. The curriculum should drive the tests, not vice versa. Tests should not set the standards but should reflect the standards already built into the curriculum. The standards should be based on notions of what is needed for success in life and should be tempered by a sense of fairness and realism. They should be high enough to be motivating, but should be attainable by all students of normal ability who are willing to work. And they must reflect content that can be taught and learned.

The fear of the test critics is that the narrow focus of the tests and their unequal impact on different school populations may lead to the emergence of a two-tiered system of public education, a lower one offering training in the basics and a higher one offering a traditional liberal education. Advocates of testing say that we have such stratification now and that the tests are revealing these differences and forcing positive change. On this issue, it appears that the critics may be overlook real benefits associated with testing and may be exaggerating the negative consequences; likewise, the proponents also seem to be overlooking some serious unintended effects that may harm the interests of "at-risk" youth.

## The Impact of Testing on Teaching

The effects competency tests will have on the process of teaching and on the profession itself are unclear. Polls show that teachers are largely favorably disposed towards the tests although they express doubts about their fairness for all students (Dorr-Bremme & Herman, 1984). The tests do provide a focus for the work of teachers and they eliminate some of the burden of defending professional judgments about student performance, judgments that many parents are less willing to accept than in times past. But if the tests provide teachers with job descriptions, they do so at a price because they also give more control to administrators over the work of teachers and may make schools more bureaucratic (Wise, 1979).

Similarly, the technically rational tests can be expected to replace and undermine the now dominant role of professional judgment in assessing student performance. Schools now operate with two tiers of assessment, one external, impersonal, and supposedly objective, the other internal, personal, and more subjective. Teachers still tend to place more reliance on information they collect themselves as a result of daily assignments and close observation of students (Dorr-Bremme & Herman, 1984) but parents seem to be less and less willing to trust the judgment of teachers. The public has greater confidence in tests, and it seems a safe prediction that there will be more and more reliance on test information in making educational decisions. The irony is that individual students and parents routinely accept teacher grades as valid indicators of school performance and grade point averages still exert strong influence on post high school plans, but the public, in general, does not seem to trust the standards these grades represent.

The test scores also exert influence over teachers' decisions about curriculum, student placement, and resource allocation in some districts (Dorr-Bremme & Herman, 1984). When the test results are poor, the emphasis is on coaching students to pass the exams. Where good results are assured, the tests may have little effect on the work of teachers. In the former circumstances, the tests and their narrow content focus may reduce the incentives for innovation. Certainly, there is likely to be a greater risk in devoting time or money to teaching content not covered by the tests than there was in the past. Proponents of the tests say that the focus on outcomes will give teachers greater control over the means of instruction. Professional autonomy will be increased, they contend. But just the opposite appears to be the case in districts serving "at-risk" youth. The test scores have become so important for parents, administrators, and local boards of education, that they are unwilling to risk much professional autonomy. In these situations, the use of state tests appears to be associated with increased administrative control over both the process and the content of instruction.

## The Effects of Testing on Public Opinion

The public supports the concept of a competency test as a requirement for graduation (Gallup, 1984; Freeman, Cusick, & Huoang, 1985). One recent scientific survey found over 90 percent favored the tests and over 80 percent of those in favor said they would support testing even if their own child were denied a diploma because of failure to pass the test (Freeman, Cusick, & Huoang, 1985). The tough mindedness underlying the current public mood was revealed when, in the same survey, over three-quarters of those who

favored the tests indicated that they would continue to do so even if low-income children suffered adverse effects, such as a 50 percent failure rate.

The tests are attractive to the public because they reduce some of the uncertainty associated with education. Are the schools good or bad? Just look at the test scores and compare them to those in other communities. The public now can monitor the schools and can exert pressure for improvements. Parents thus no longer have to leave the fate of their children solely in the hands of educators whom they have come to distrust. In an increasingly stratified and tracked school system, test data have become the currency in the negotiations between the school and the home about the placement of students. Taxpayers also have new information to use in their struggles against budget increases. Legislators and politicians can use the scores to claim credit or to justify their policies and programs. The tests seem to serve the interests of many groups and therefore have strong and lasting support.

It is difficult to say what the long-run impact of annual test scores will be on public attitudes. Real estate interests in New Jersey already use the state test results to steer clients toward some communities and away from others. There also is reason to fear that the scores will be used as arguments against equalizing funding on the grounds that money is wasted in ineffective school districts. Such arguments have been heard in the New Jersey legislature.

It should be remembered that educational standards are almost always standards of adequacy; they do not define maximums in spite of all the silly talk about maximum competency testing. There is no ceiling on learning and

the level of achievement that is regarded as "good" is a matter of relative advantage. State test scores, like other educational standards, will operate as measures of failure rather than standards of success. The public is not very interested in how many students pass a standard that must be met by all, but they will be upset if the number of failures is either too high or too low. In fact, recent history demonstrates that when the pass rate on a competency test rises to the point where almost everyone passes, the test will be criticized as being too easy and will be changed.

## Summary

What can one conclude from this brief review of the issues surrounding the use of statewide competency tests. First, it seems clear that the tests are here to stay. There are good and compelling reasons for the push to raise standards and the tests have strong support both from the public and the profession. Second, the tests will not resolve the issues of equity that still plague public education, for these are not technical problems but political ones concerning the distribution of resources and opportunities. However, the tests will make some of those inequities, such as achievement in the basic skills, more visible while contributing to others, such as differences in the content and character of the curriculum. Third, there may be serious negative effects associated with the use of the tests that must be monitored. Some of these effects, such as the narrowing of the curriculum, may require additional state actions to ensure that important learning is not neglected.

It has been noted that "...American school children are the most tested and the least examined" (Resnick & Resnick, 1985, p. 17). Tests, in

this case, refer to the universally administered standardized tests that are only loosely linked to the curriculum, while examinations suggest formal inquiries into the degree to which a curriculum has been mastered. State competency tests, with their powerful curricular effects, are moving us closer to the point where our children are "examined." Unfortunately, however, they cover only a narrow part of the curriculum of the public schools and thus there is risk of an imbalance, particularly for those "at-risk" students who are most vulnerable to failure.

This line of reasoning suggests that the solutions to the problems raised by state testing may not be less testing as advocated by NCAS and other progressives but more and better testing. Tests that are discipline-based and cover the full-range of the curriculum may produce both the accountability and the motivating effects that are desired without the curricular distortions. This would particularly be true if local communities could choose which tests they wished their children to take, thus leaving some authority and choice at the local level. And, if the tests were graduated in difficulty, the problem of denying deserving students their diplomas might be avoided.

Current testing policies are clearly inadequate. There is a need for a full public debate on the curriculum, on the role of testing, and on the locus of these policy decisions. The issues are too important and the potential consequences too serious to leave the issues to an ad hoc process of test development that may fail to realize its potential benefits, while seriously harming the education of our most vulnerable children.

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