

Pros and Cons of
**COMPETENCY TESTING
FOR TEACHERS**

By Dee Anderson

In the past few years the American public has voiced increasing concern about education. Their anxiety centers on the quality of classroom teachers, school curriculum, and teacher preparation programs. Numerous groups and commissions have discussed the problem at length and have advocated major changes. The National Commission for Excellence in Teacher Education was specifically commissioned to study teacher preparation programs across the nation.

How have legislators and other public officials responded to the public outcry? A common reaction to the controversy has been to mandate teacher testing. The enthusiasm with which this idea has been embraced implies that if teachers were just smarter and better trained, the problems in our schools would disappear.

Unfortunately, other pertinent issues such as low teacher salaries, stress and burnout, low public esteem for educators and the teaching profession, discipline and classroom management problems, and insufficient funding have received considerably less attention.

In 1984 Smith reported that 21 states tested or planned to test applicants in the basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics before allowing them admission

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into a teacher preparation program.¹ Anrig reported that by 1988, 29 states will require all teacher education students to pass an exit exam in teaching methodology and learning theory, after completing a baccalaureate degree and prior to receiving state certification.² Through testing states hope to ensure that future teachers will possess the necessary skills and knowledge to function effectively in the classroom.

At the present time educators and others are hotly debating the pros and cons of competency testing. Teacher educators must face the variety of dilemmas that state legislatures' requirements have thrust upon them. How are they to shape curriculum to meet state standards, which seem to be constantly changing? Will the education they offer qualify their students to teach in other states? Should they implement five-year teacher training programs?

The specter of testing raises many questions, such as these:

- Is it educationally expedient to require competency tests for admission into and graduation from teacher preparation programs?
- Do teacher tests accurately predict future classroom teaching performance?
- Will testing worsen teacher shortages?
- Are the tests biased?

In the rush to test teachers, we have raised many questions, but provided few answers to important issues. Competency testing has both pros and cons. These should be given careful consideration by the public, state legislatures, and educational administrators before they advocate any "quick-fix" measures to cure the current ills of American education.

Pros of Competency Testing

Testing should help ensure the quality of teaching candidates. Weaker students will be weeded out because they fail to pass basic tests in reading, writing, and mathematics.

Testing enthusiasts believe that more rigorous standards will elevate the status of teaching and help attract more academically gifted

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students into teacher preparation programs. Indeed, some education departments have increased their enrollments, possibly as the result of the mandated testing requirements.

The public has reacted enthusiastically to the prospect of testing, seeing it as a positive strategy to counteract the problems in American education. Many principals and school boards believe that testing will guarantee them better teaching candidates for their schools.

As teacher education receives greater emphasis and attention, students enrolled in these programs should develop more positive attitudes toward their instructional programs and future teaching career. These students should also benefit from being more closely monitored and advised as they progress through their teacher preparation programs.

Mandated competency testing should also exert a broader influence on college teaching as a whole. It will increase teachers' awareness of the greater emphasis now being given to students' performing well in the basic skills of reading, mathematics, and writing in *all* academic disciplines, not just professional educational classes.

Teaching involves much too broad a spectrum of skills, attitudes, knowledge, and human understanding to be fully measured by either a high or low score on a pencil-and-paper test.

Cons of Competency Testing

Available research has not established a positive relationship between competency test scores and actual teaching performance in the classroom. Teaching involves much too broad a spectrum of skills, attitudes, knowledge, and human understanding to be fully measured by either a high or low score on a paper-and-pencil test.

In fact, it appears that competency testing could narrow the broad scope of academic excellence by zeroing in on easily measurable objectives, while ignoring less easily defined but equally important skills. How would one measure creativity, motivation, ingenuity, or compassion on a competency test? What about such necessary attributes as love of children, ability to work with administrators and school boards, maturity, organizational skills, and adaptability?

Test content and procedures vary widely from state to state. Some states design their own tests while others use examinations developed by Educational Testing Service (ETS) such as the PPST, CBEST, NTE, et cetera. Certain states test students before admitting them into teacher preparation programs, while others test at the completion of such programs. A few states test both before and after.

Many educators prefer criterion-referenced tests rather than the more commonly used norm-referenced tests. Use of criterion-referenced tests would make it easier to identify and sequence instructional competencies at the college level, which might help make teacher preparation programs more effective.

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We must recognize that teacher preparation programs *must* change. Neither the time allotted to teacher education nor its content is fixed. And we must also recognize that, if teacher educators do not see to the reform of teacher education themselves, external forces will surely do so.⁹

The University of New Hampshire. To study career decisions, researchers took a stratified random sample of 248 over a five-year period (1976-1981). The most important factor for choosing the five-year program was social-service motivation (Helping/Human Growth). The second most frequently cited factor in support of a teaching career by the same group was enjoyment of children. (However, this rating is nearly entirely the result of women's priorities.)

Love of subject was the third most important factor for those choosing the five-year program. "The subject major requirement . . . attracts students who love their subject field and would not leave it to major in education if that were required to become a teacher."¹⁰

Conclusions

In order to reform teacher education we must first define what constitutes a quality teacher training program. Changes should not be made without first clarifying the goals of teacher education. A unity of theory and practice can be achieved only by attention to goals and behavioral objectives.

Murray's major criticism of the University of Kansas program centers on the process by which the crucial issues were identified. "In my opinion," he said, "an error was made in defining the central issue, and as a consequence, the wrong list of problems was drawn up."¹¹ Murray argues that the university's response had little relevance to the real problem.

The correct issue would have been whether teachers are currently performing competently and adequately in the classroom; and if not, why not? When the issue is stated in that way, the specific areas for analysis become the actual experiences of teachers in the schools and, of course, the

reciprocal learning achievement of their students. Only after this analysis is made can possible alternatives be noted which might alleviate the problems found at the school level.¹²

Program reform is also hindered by the need to involve a wide number of faculty in planning. Some faculty members refuse to spend the large amounts of time necessary in program design meetings. Since the best way to insure tenure and promotion has usually been for faculty members to build a specialized area of expertise in a narrow research area, professors are often not experientially ready for the give-and-take inherent in program development.

Colleges should reject across-the-board orders to add a fifth year to the education baccalaureate. Adding a fifth floor to a four-story house offers few benefits if the foundation is shaky.

Before increasing the length of teacher preparation programs, the four-year sequence must be strengthened so that it truly represents college-level work. Simultaneous with this increased rigor, departments and schools of education must clarify their goals to determine whether these will be better achieved through an extended program. □

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minority students are being eliminated from teacher preparation programs because of failure to perform well on the mandated tests. Hansen reported in 1983 in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that only 34 percent of the black candidates passed the first mandated test in Georgia compared with 87 percent of whites.³

In Louisiana, 15 percent of black applicants passed the National Teacher's Exam (NTE), compared with 78 percent of whites. In Texas, projections based on data from 61 colleges suggest that if the current rate of test failure continues, by the year 1988, 96 percent of black candidates and 85 percent of Hispanic candidates will not be admitted into teacher preparation programs unless effective intervention and instructional programs can be developed to help all candidates achieve their educational goals.

Andrews projected that by 1990 minority teachers may represent only five percent of the teaching population as a result of the mandated tests, retirements, teacher burnout, and other reasons.⁴

Possible Teacher Shortages

Competency testing will eliminate many would-be teachers, making the teacher shortage more critical. States may be forced to revise criteria for teaching, issue emergency permits to unqualified teachers, or provide alternative types of certification—which in the long run could weaken the educational process and defeat current efforts to improve the quality of education.

Teacher preparation institutions are feeling increased pressure to maintain a high percentage of pass

rates in order to retain their state accreditation. In 1981, Florida passed a law requiring that in each teacher preparation institution in the state, at least 80 percent of the students must pass the competency tests in order for the school to maintain accreditation and state approval. As a result of this law, in 1983 Florida revoked approval of 38 college and university teacher preparation programs.⁵

If other states implement similar oversight programs, many more colleges and university teacher training programs will be terminated. Such laws could have serious implications for Seventh-day Adventist colleges, as they train substantial numbers of teachers for both church and public education.

State agencies publish rankings and comparisons among individual colleges and universities in their state. These reports could have a substantial impact on enrollment and funding of teacher education programs.

Conclusions and Possible Solutions

Even though teacher educators did not create the current testing dilemma, they must deal with the difficulties created by outside agencies and organizations. Recognizing both the pros and cons of testing, teacher educators have made suggestions and implemented changes to help resolve some of the existing problems.

College and university teacher training programs should help all their students—including minorities—to achieve the necessary competencies to pass at the expected level of proficiency, or above, any required tests, whether such examinations relate to basic skills, knowledge of a particular discipline, or teaching methodology. At the same time, however, states and testing organizations need to make sure that tests are valid measures of the competencies required for teaching.

Within the past year the Holmes and Carnegie reports have advocated more educational reform and revision of teacher education. The Holmes group recommends three basic recommendations for reform:

Mandated competency testing should exert a broader influence on college teaching as a whole.

(1) strengthening the teacher preparation curriculum by making it a five-year program equivalent to a master's degree; (2) developing a reward system to honor better and more effective teachers; (3) establishing a closer working relationship between the schools and the teacher education programs. The last recommendation assumes that schools and colleges are (or should be) closely intertwined and must work together to produce quality future teachers.⁶

The Carnegie Task Force recently produced a report entitled "A Nation Prepared" in which they asserted that at least 20 percent of all university and college students must be recruited into teacher preparation programs in order to alleviate the critical teacher shortage that now exists. The Carnegie report calls for upgraded compensation for teachers, active recruitment of minority candidates, and more rigorous teacher preparation programs to alleviate this shortage.

The quality of education in our nation's—and church's—schools depends on the quality of classroom teachers. Therefore, all groups involved with education—state legislatures, study groups, colleges and universities, church administrators, and the public—need to maintain open channels of communication so that they can work together to find solutions to their common concerns. □

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LEGAL UPDATE

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Mormon church-owned institutions challenged a section of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. While forbidding religion-based discrimination in employment, the law allows a religious organization to give employment preference to its own members. This has been interpreted to mean that a church-owned entity may require its employees to be members in good standing of that church.

The Mormon employees convinced a lower court judge to rule that the section in question is an unconstitutional establishment of religion when applied to jobs not purely religious in nature, and to set up an involved three-part test to determine which jobs in a church-owned institution are religious (and exempt under Title VII) and which are not. Overturning that ruling, the Supreme Court said that such court scrutiny of individual jobs would produce an unacceptable level of entanglement between church and state (contrary to the Establishment Clause). Further, the Court held that the statutory exemption served the legitimate secular purpose of avoiding just such entanglement.

This ruling relieved the anxieties of the many religious organizations that believe all positions in their schools, hospitals, and other institutions have religious significance. They may now feel free to require that their employees be church members in good standing.

Yet one significant concern remains: three justices noted that they might see things differently if the jobs in question had been at a for-profit rather than nonprofit entity, even though church owned. In the future, an employee of a campus industry, hospital subsidiary, or some similar operation may try to enter that door—which the Court left slightly ajar. □