

**REPORT OF THE**  
**JOINT SUBCOMMITTEE STUDYING**  
**MINIMUM COMPETENCY TESTING**  
**TO**  
**THE GOVERNOR**  
**AND**  
**THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF VIRGINIA**



**HOUSE DOCUMENT NO. 25**

**COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA**  
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**1981**

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James H. Dillard, II  
George W. Grayson  
Edward M. Holland  
Robison B. James  
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**Report of the  
Joint Subcommittee Studying  
Minimum Competency Testing  
To  
The Governor and the General Assembly of Virginia  
Richmond, Virginia  
December, 1980**

To: Honorable John N. Dalton, Governor of Virginia  
and  
The General Assembly of Virginia

House Joint Resolution No. 115, adopted by the 1980 General Assembly, requested that the Education Committee of the House of Delegates and the Education and Health Committee of the Senate establish a joint subcommittee to study all aspects of minimum competency testing. The text of House Joint Resolution No. 115 is as follows:

**HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 115**

Requesting the House Committee on Education and the Senate Committee on Education and Health to study competency tests for each grade in the public schools.

**Agreed to by the House of Delegates, March 8, 1980**

**Agreed to by the Senate, March 7, 1980**

WHEREAS, the standards of quality for the public schools will require each student to pass a competency test to obtain a high school diploma; and

WHEREAS, the standards of quality also provide for Statewide minimum educational objectives in the primary and intermediate grades; and

WHEREAS, students who have not attained the minimum competencies necessary for a high school diploma should have been identified and assisted long before taking the test for a high school diploma; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the House of Delegates, the Senate concurring, That the Chairmen of the House Committee on Education and the Senate Committee on Education and Health are requested to appoint a joint subcommittee of members of their respective committees to study whether promotion should be based on achievement and to study all aspects of the minimum competency test for a high school diploma. The Superintendent of Public Instruction or his designee shall be a member of the joint subcommittee. The Department of Education is requested to provide such assistance as the subcommittee may request. The subcommittee shall make such legislative recommendations as it deems advisable to the nineteen hundred eighty-one Session of the General Assembly.

Pursuant to House Joint Resolution No. 115, the Chairmen of the House Education Committee and the Senate Education and Health Committee appointed members of their respective committees to a joint subcommittee. The members were: Delegate James H. Dillard, II, of Fairfax; Delegate George W. Grayson, of Williamsburg; Delegate Robison B. James, of Richmond; Delegate Alexander B. McMurtrie, Jr., of Midlothian; Senator Edward M. Holland, of Arlington, and Senator Elliot S. Schewel, of Lynchburg. Dr. S. John Davis, Superintendent of Public Instruction was also appointed to the joint subcommittee. Delegate Alexander B. McMurtrie served as chairman.

The subcommittee received testimony from professional education associations, education journalists, the Department of Education and interested citizens. The following information was submitted by the Department of Education. The subcommittee's recommendation is based, in part, on this information.

**Impact on Students**

Minimum competency testing is an outgrowth of the "accountability movement and the competency-based education movement." "It focuses attention upon the basic academic skills of

reading, writing and arithmetic; it presumes that the state will set education objectives; it presumes that the local school districts will conduct its programs so that the objectives will be achieved; it emphasizes minimum objectives for grade-to-grade promotion and/or high school graduation; and it supposes that objectives will be stated explicitly and that statewide tests will determine whether the objectives are attained.”<sup>1</sup>

There is agreement on the need to evaluate student progress and academic achievement. However, there is concern that students are being asked to assume too much of the responsibility for accountability while educational programs and institutions are assuming too little. There is also concern regarding student reaction to minimum competency tests. For some, the tests offer no challenge; others are challenged by them, but still others become frustrated and discouraged by the tests after several unsuccessful attempts to pass them.

It is significant to note that although most states have some form of competency testing, only fourteen states require students to pass the tests as a requisite for graduation. These states are: Arizona, California, Delaware, Florida, Maryland, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, and Virginia. Many states use competency tests to determine students' strengths and weaknesses, and to evaluate the success of instructional programs. States which prohibit the use of such tests to determine eligibility for grade-to-grade promotion or graduation are Arkansas, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Nebraska, and Rhode Island.

### Measure of Teacher Effectiveness

Many factors other than teacher effectiveness contribute to the success or failure of students. There is concern that tests designed to measure student achievement will be used to gauge teacher effectiveness and that teachers may be held accountable for student achievement or lack of it. Teachers cannot and should not be held accountable for those factors over which they have little or no control (e.g., the wide range of student ability, socio-economic factors, family aspirations and support).

### Socio-Economic Factors

It has been established that socio-economic factors are reflected in test results. As a group, students from homes in which the parents are well-educated and have the income to provide enriching experiences score better on tests than children from homes with contrasting conditions.

It has been demonstrated that competency tests place students from lower socio-economic environments at a disadvantage as the failure rates are much higher among these students. These socio-economic related differences in failure rates are manifested by an apparent racial difference in the success rate. It is predictable, for example, that black students as a group, because of socio-economic factors, will not score as high as white students as a group even though some black students score higher than some white students.

### Regional Differences

A set of uniform standards applied to people of diverse backgrounds and localities raises the question of possible regional differences. Within the Commonwealth of Virginia, there are variations in socio-economic conditions, job opportunities, community aspirations, opportunities for higher education and contact with industry and research. Consequently, students may exhibit a higher level of competency in one region or community than their counterpart demonstrate in another community. Comparisons of test results between communities often do not take into consideration these regional differences, resulting in precarious, perhaps inequitable, judgments concerning the quality of the educational programs.

### Handicapped Students

When tests are used to determine eligibility to receive a high school diploma, all students including handicapped students, must pass the tests in order to receive a diploma. Advocates for the handicapped feel that frequently this use of tests as a requisite deny some students diplomas because of handicaps. Efforts to accomodate the handicapped by changing the requirements for such students to qualify for a diploma elicit the accusation that the standards are being “watered down or a dual standard applied” and that the diploma is not worth anything. The question becomes a

philosophical one centered around the meaning of the diploma; does a diploma signify achievement or attendance?

### Time and Money

Large scale testing programs are expensive in terms of student and teacher time, production, distribution and scoring. Some have questioned whether the investment in time and money is justified by the results achieved. Some believe that teachers and students could more profitably spend the time devoted to giving and taking the tests in additional teaching and learning activities. Money spent on producing and distributing tests could then possibly yield greater results by being spent on instructional materials.

### Effect on Curriculum

While no one questions the importance of reading and mathematics, it has been suggested that areas such as science and the arts are being neglected because of the emphasis on the so-called competency areas. There is some basis for this concern as that which is tested will receive instructional emphasis; whereas that which is not tested may be relegated to a less important role in instructional programs.

### Tests and Professional Judgment

As tests assume greater importance, there is a tendency to substitute the apparent conclusion drawn from test results for sound professional judgment. This causes concern given the limitations of tests. However, increasing knowledge about how students learn can be of great benefit to teachers in designing curriculum materials and programs. It is alarming that the general public has greater confidence in competency tests than do the professionals who develop and utilize them.

## **BOARD OF EDUCATION ACTION**

### 1976 Accreditation Standards

Realizing the growing public demand for assurances that students who graduate from high school have acquired certain essential knowledge and skills, the Board of Education in 1976 amended the graduation requirements to include competencies in four areas: reading, mathematics, citizenship, and ability to pursue further education or to obtain employment. These competencies were to be established by each school division and were to be demonstrated to the satisfaction of local school divisions. It is significant to note that under this plan, tests were not required and no uniform Statewide test was planned.

### Statewide Tests

The 1978 General Assembly revised the Standards of Quality to include the competency testing requirement for high school graduation. Consistent with this requirement, the Board of Education identified the areas of reading and mathematics for Statewide tests. The areas of citizenship and post-high school qualifications remained as local responsibilities.

A committee with Statewide representation was formed by the Board to identify specific competencies in reading and mathematics which should be measured by the competency tests. These competencies were approved by the Board of Education in the spring of 1978 and formed the basis upon which the reading and mathematics tests were developed. A passing score of 70 percent was established for each test. The tests were administered first to students in the class of 1981 and later to students in the class of 1982.

### Policies and Regulations

As the graduation competency testing program developed and matured, the Board of Education approved a number of regulations governing it. Among the earliest decisions made by the Board were the following:

1. testing will begin no later than the tenth grade;

2. retesting will be provided for students whose scores fall below 70 percent; and

3. students will be certified as completing the competency test requirement when they pass the test for the first time, with no further testing required.

Based on the experience gained by the early stages of the program and the identification of additional items requiring policy decisions, the Board recently augmented the earlier regulations. New regulations pertain to out-of-state transfer students entering Virginia schools, students who drop out of school but subsequently decide to take the tests in order to complete graduation requirements, adults working toward a high school diploma, seniors who have not passed the tests, and handicapped students. The most significant decisions were to provide three opportunities for seniors to take the tests and to make accommodations for handicapped students, such as reading to a student with a learning disability such as dyslexia which prevents such students from reading independently.

#### 1980-82 Standards of Quality

In view of the evolution of the graduation competency test in Virginia since 1976, the Board recommended and the General Assembly approved modification of the testing standard in the 1980-82 Standards of Quality. The standard now in effect continues the requirement that students pass uniform State tests in reading and mathematics and reaffirms that the citizenship and post-high school competencies can be demonstrated by means other than tests.

Another change in the Standards of Quality for 1980-82 added a provision for remedial help for low-achieving students. Students in grades eight and nine in need of remediation can be identified by other tests in the State testing program and assistance can be offered to remediate deficiencies before such students take the graduation competency tests for the first time.

### **VIRGINIA'S EXPERIENCE**

#### Classes of 1981 and 1982 Tested

The class of 1981 was tested first when the students were at the beginning of the tenth grade. Over 70,000 students took the tests and 82 percent passed both the reading and mathematics portions. Girls had a slightly higher passing rate than boys and white students, as a group, did better than black students, as a group. More than one-fourth of the 1,484 students identified as handicapped passed. The highest passing rate for a locality was 99 percent and the lowest was 49 percent.

By the end of their junior year, 97 percent of the students in the class of 1981 had passed the tests. By race, approximately one percent of the white students and 10 percent of the black students will have to take the tests and pass them in order to receive diplomas.

The results from the class of 1982 are similar. This class will be in the eleventh grade during 1980-81 and students who have not already passed the tests have several more opportunities to do so.

#### Remedial Programs

Since the testing began, school divisions have developed a variety of programs and activities to strengthen the skills of students who did not pass the tests. These programs differ from one locality to another, depending on such variables as the number of students needing remediation.

During 1980-81 more than nine million dollars in State funds will be allocated to localities to assist low-achieving students, three million dollars of which is designated for assistance to students in grades eight and nine with the hope that fewer students will subsequently fail the graduation competency tests.

#### Retentions Increasing

Parelleling the emphasis on the "basics" and the establishment of "standards" has been an increase in the number of students denied promotion to the next grade. In 1976-77, 94.5 percent of the students enrolled were promoted to the next grade. By 1978-79, the percent promoted had

decreased to 92.1 percent. While no cause and effect relationship can be documented, it can be speculated that there is a relationship between explicit standards of achievement and promotion rates.

### Drop-outs Increasing

In 1976-77, 5.1 percent of students in grades eight through twelve dropped out of school during the school term. By 1978-79 the dropout rate had increased to 5.7 percent.

Another measure of the holding power of the school is the percentage of ninth grade students who graduate four years later. The graduates of 1977 represented 74.6 percent of the ninth grade class of 1973-74. The graduates of 1979 had dropped to 72.4 percent of the ninth grade class of 1975-76.

Again, no cause and effect relationship between dropouts and explicit standards or increased failures can be documented. This is a situation which deserves attention in the months and years ahead.

### Standards of Learning Programs

The Board of Education has approved a Standards of Learning Program which is now being developed. In this program, learner objectives for grades K-12 will be identified and instruction will proceed to assist students in developing the skills and acquiring the knowledge set out in the objectives. These learner objectives assimilate the objectives now included in the Basic Learning Skills program and the Graduation Competency program. Test will be a part of this instructional program so that teachers can develop individual progress records for each student. In this way, the attainment of competencies now included in the graduation competency tests can be monitored early and certified when mastery occurs.

In addition to the tests used for instructional purposes, there will be assessments of the extent to which Virginia students are achieving the objectives of the Standards of Learning program. These assessments will be given to a sampling of students at several benchmark points, such as grades 4, 8, and 11. The results of these assessments will be reported.

Source: "Information Presented to Legislative Subcommittee on Minimum Competency Testing", Department of Education, July 31, 1980.

Footnote 1. Arthur E. Wise. "A Critique on Minimum Competency Testing". (Washington, D.C.: Rand Corporation), September, 1977, p. 1.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

The joint subcommittee recommends that policies or regulations requiring grade-to-grade promotion based upon the passage of competency tests not be instituted at this time. The joint subcommittee recommends further that the General Assembly review and study the effects of the new Standards of Learning Program implemented by the Department of Education.

## **CONCLUSION**

The joint subcommittee believes that the new Standards of Learning Program will contribute greatly to the detection of student weaknesses. This program will provide earlier intervention, thereby making remediation much more effective. Given sufficient time for implementation, experience and proper administration, it can lessen the number of students who do not pass the competency tests required for receiving a diploma.

The subcommittee is appreciative of the assistance of all persons who contributed to this report. It is especially appreciative of the assistance and cooperation of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Dr. S. John Davis and the staff of the Department of Education in the conduct of this study.

Respectfully submitted,

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James H. Dillard, II  
George W. Grayson  
Edward M. Holland  
Robison B. James  
Elliot S. Schewel  
Dr. S. John Davis