Minimum Competency Testing and the Handicapped Student: Testing Skills, Not Abilities

Many school districts have adopted competency test schedules and administrators have begun working on procedures to smoothly implement this new aspect of the education program. But administrators also need to consider the needs of special education students in their competency test plans, says this author.

SHOCKED PUBLIC has asked for assurances that high school graduates have mastered basic skills. State education agencies have responded with minimum competency tests that include successful performance on a series of skill tests as part of the requirements for a high school diploma.

Since court decisions have upheld the right of school districts to require such proof of competency from all students, including the handicapped, and other decisions have held that handicapped students must meet the same proficiency standards as other students and cannot be refused the opportunity to demonstrate their competence on the required tests ("Competency Testing Program Upheld," 1983; Lewis, 1979; McCarthy, 1983), administrators need to consider the needs of special education students in their competency test plans.

But how do you hand a printed booklet to a blind student; read test directions aloud to a deaf student; demand an hour's attention and concentration of a hyperactive learning disabled student?

Research has shown that incorporating certain modifications into the test format or test setting can increase the

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likelihood of success for handicapped students without altering the standards of the tests (Beattie, Grise, and Algozine, 1983; Grise, Beattie, and Algozine, 1982; McKinney and Haskins, et al., 1980).

Districts need to develop guidelines to help staff, handicapped students, and their parents make appropriate arrangements and decisions about minimum competency testing.

**Student Rights**

While handicapped students are not exempt from passing a competency test to graduate, they are ensured of several procedural safeguards.

- Handicapped students cannot be denied the right to attempt competency tests, no matter how unlikely their success might seem.
- Handicapped students are entitled to sufficient advance notice of the competency requirement to permit them time for special or additional preparation.
- Handicapped students are entitled to modifications in test format and setting to ensure that they can demonstrate their knowledge with minimum effect of their handicapping condition.

Since handicapped students are measured on the same measuring stick as non-handicapped students, the challenge is to test their skill, not their physical, mental, or behavioral ability to take a test.

The multidisciplinary team that evaluates handicapped students' skills and abilities and verifies program eligibility is an appropriate group to make recommendations to parents and staff about whether a student should attempt the tests and, if so, how the test situation should be modified.

When the student and family have reviewed the recommendations and have decided on a course of action, the decision regarding competency testing and modifications for test procedures should be drafted into a memorandum of understanding, signed by representatives of the family and the school. The student's IEP can then reflect preparation for the competencies in the manner that they will be tested.

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By making these plans before the end of the ninth grade, the student and the teachers can have ample time to prepare for the tests. If the student's condition changes, the team can be reconvened to modify recommendations.

**Options for Modified Test Arrangements**

Each handicapping condition presents special needs. The following options for modifying test arrangements may be considered and expanded on as special situations arise.

**Option 1.** Suggested for mildly retarded, emotionally disturbed, physically handicapped, or learning disabled students, or any handicapped students who need help understanding directions
and staying on task.
- Page content is reduced. (Test booklets are taken apart and reassembled with no more than one problem, or a group of very short related problems, on a page.)
- Tests are administered in groups of no more than six students.
- There are no time limits on the tests.
- The testing is scheduled during several sessions of no more than 30 minutes each.
- The student writes the answers directly in the test booklets, rather than on separate answer sheets.
- Tests are printed in unjustified format (uneven right margin) for passage reading; there are boxes or lines around information and comprehension passages to set them apart from their related questions.

A proctor is present and available to answer questions about test procedures; to assist students in locating pages, columns, and items; and to provide reassurance and encouragement.

Option 2. Suggested for moderately handicapped students: hard of hearing, limited vision, seriously emotionally disturbed, severely learning disabled, severely language impaired, or any handicapped youngsters whose distractibility or behavior interferes with group work.
- Tests are administered in a one-to-one setting with no other students present.
- Test directions and explanations are given orally.
- Items in which reading skill is not the skill being assessed are read aloud to the student.
- The proctor uses professional judgment to determine how long any single testing session should last and how frequently rest breaks should be provided.

Option 3. Suggested for severely handicapped students: blind, deaf, non-mobile, or any youngsters whose disabilities or combinations of disabilities create testing needs that require special equipment, special environment, or specialized assistance.

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- Special modifications are designed on an individual basis. These might include brailled items, special typewriters, language boards, signing interpreters, or testing in home or hospital.
- Test items are rewritten, if necessary, to permit alternate response modes such as nodding, blinking, signing, etc.
- Subjects to be tested are substituted or deleted where the handicap makes it physically impossible (for example, typing for handwriting, braille reading for print reading, signing or writing for oral language).

Proctors will need special training so that they are sensitive to students' needs, but maintain the integrity of the tests. They will need information about handicaps and their effects, and specific information about the handicaps of students assigned to them, so that they can make on-the-spot decisions about how
to help the students with test-mechanics without "feeding" them answers. The community's respect for the diplomas of handicapped students hinges on careful proctoring.

Competency tests are just one more aspect of the mainstream for which we are preparing handicapped students. Being tested, and passing or failing, is part of the life experience shared by handicapped and non-handicapped alike. We need to make the administrative accommodations that will make it a valid experience.

References


"Competency Testing Program Upheld: Attorney's Fees Assessed Against LEA."


Motivating Teachers in the Effective School

"The concept of motivating teachers in the effective school cannot be examined as a separate entity in itself," according to Howard Conley, associate superintendent of Chandler (Ariz.) Unified School District. "It must be considered as a factor that results when the complete spectrum of the effective school philosophy is adopted, enacted, and given life in the educational setting."

Building principals, he says, must create an environment, an experience that is in itself the motivating factor; an environment that continually regenerates motivation in itself. This environment must be one that lends itself to the primary goal that each principal must face—"Let each student reach his or her level of academic excellence."