

EDUCATION NOW

Brouhaha over Competency Testing

by Gene I. Maeroff

A move toward "competency based" education seems to be gaining impetus in many parts of the country. Is this move an efficient means of assuring educational accountability?

Barbara A. Hayes
Berwyn, Pa.

THE MINIMUM COMPETENCY movement is a national response to concern about a supposed decline in standards in the nation's schools. When young people who are high school graduates have trouble reading an assignment in college, balancing a checkbook, or filling out a job application, questions about the quality of their education are bound to be raised. Thus the notion of setting certain basic levels of attainment for all students has gained wide appeal.

As the result of action by their legislatures or their state education departments, at least 33 states have adopted some kind of minimum competency requirements for earning a diploma or for promotion from one grade to another. Individual school districts around the country have instituted these programs. All of this is linked to the so-called back-to-basics movement, which is merely another way of saying that youngsters should be competent in the fundamentals.

Yet much of what has taken place under the rubric of minimum competency has tended toward the simplistic. "There has been little, if any, previous in-depth review of how to go about such testing or [of] what happens when testing occurs," says the Education Commission of the States about minimum competency examinations.

In the rush to jump on the minimum competency bandwagon, many vital questions about the movement have been left unanswered. What competencies should be measured? What kinds of tests should be used? At what points in a child's education should the tests be administered? Should there be one set of standards for all students, regardless of whether they want to go to Harvard or to become auto mechanics? How high should the minimums be set? Should teachers be held responsible if their students are unsuccessful? What should be done with students who fail?

The competencies tested are gener-

ally academic skills and life skills. The academic skills—basic mathematics, vocabulary, and spelling, for example—are usually tested at about the seventh-grade level. Tests measuring life skills involve such exercises as studying a map and figuring out directions or selecting a meal from a menu and adding up its cost.

It has been established as unfair for schools to wait until students are ready to graduate before giving them the tests. Competency examinations for high school diplomas are therefore usually administered in the ninth grade so that students can discover their weaknesses in time to do something about them. But since the tests do not include high school level work, some critics fear that minimums could become maximums.

A pilot version of a proposed minimum competency test for high school graduation in New York State, for instance, includes the following question: "Which is the longest measurement? (1) 5 feet; (2) 2 feet; (3) 24 inches; (4) 2 yards."

Is this the sort of knowledge that a high school graduate should be tested on? On the other hand, can society seriously entertain the idea of granting a diploma to someone who does not know the answer to such a question?

The matter of how difficult to make the tests is perhaps at the heart of the controversy. It is a consideration fraught with political and racial overtones. All indications are that the harder the tests, the more failures there will be among students from lower-class families, who tend to do worse than middle- and upper-class students on tests of all kinds. In Florida, more

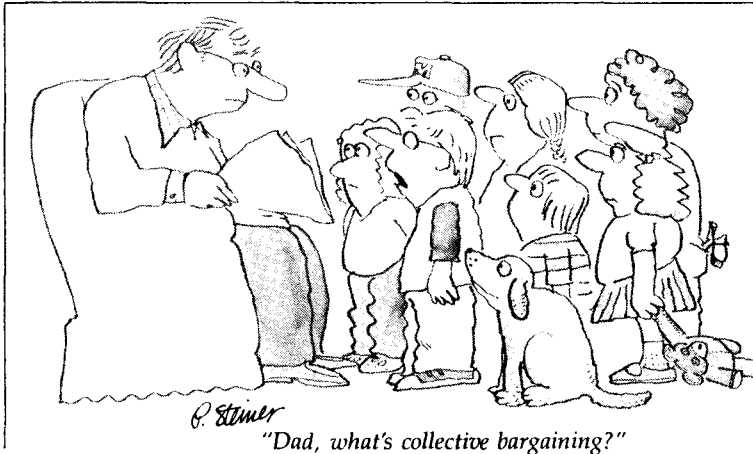
than 40 percent of its eleventh graders could not pass a mathematics proficiency test last year; black parents in that state attacked the examination as discriminatory.

Moreover, no one has quite figured out what to do with the students who cannot meet minimum competency requirements. How many incorrect answers should students be permitted? How many chances should students have to take the tests? Should there be an age limit? Most authorities maintain that the school systems owe students who fail a chance at remediation. But remedial work costs money, and where will the nation's financially struggling schools find the extra dollars?

Any school district that decides to get serious about minimum competency, especially in the big cities, could fail students in droves. But what will happen in a state like California, where each school system is free to set its own standards of minimum competency? One can almost conjure up visions of a modern generation of academic Okies, families moving from school district to school district in search of a minimum competency test that their children can pass.

Maybe it is about time that parents began thinking about holding schools and teachers responsible for the education of their children. What is being palmed off as minimum competency looks almost like a public relations gambit to get everyone but the students off the hook. It is always the children who are supposed to bear the burden of failure. ●

Gene I. Maeroff is the national education correspondent for The New York Times.



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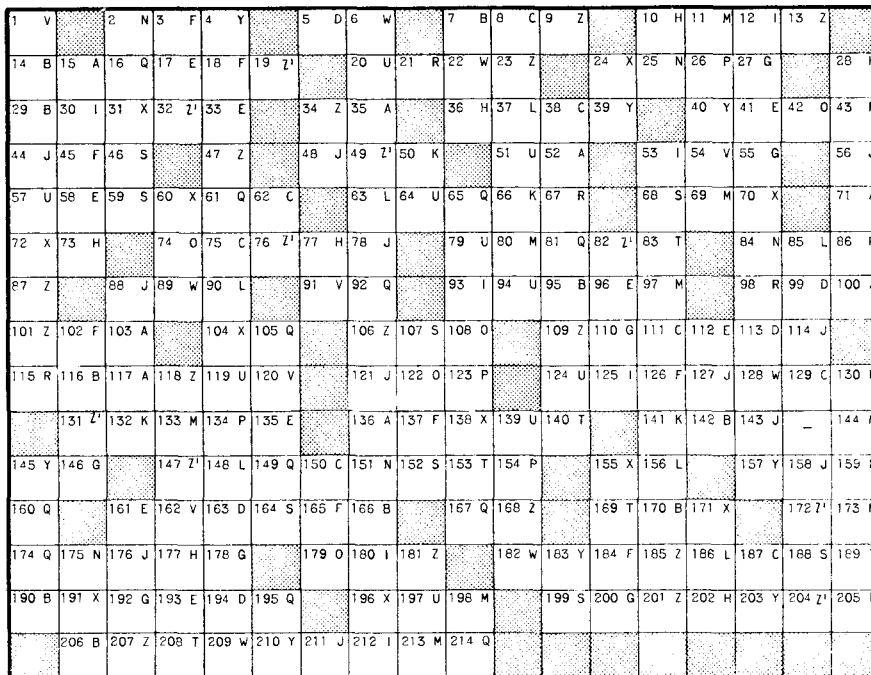
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DOUBLE-CROSTIC

Number 151

by Thomas H. Middleton



Instructions:

If you've never solved one of these puzzles, it will probably look much more difficult than it actually is. If you can answer only a few of the WORDS correctly, you're on your way to solving the puzzle. Fill in the numbered blanks of all the WORDS you can guess and write the letter of each numbered blank in its correspondingly numbered square in the diagram. The letters printed in the upper-right-hand corners of the squares indicate from what WORD a particular square's letter comes.

The diagram, when filled in, should read as a quotation from a published work. The dark squares are the spaces between words. If there is no dark square at the end of a line, a word may carry over to the line below.

The first letter of each WORD, reading down, will spell the name of the author and the title of the work from which the quotation is taken.

You should find yourself seeing words and phrases taking form in the diagram; so you can work back and forth, from WORDS to diagram and from diagram to WORDS, until the diagram is filled in.

Answer to **Double-Crostic No. 150** appears on page 22.

CLUES	WORDS
A. Assuages; mollifies	15 35 52 71 103 117 136
B. Makes tracks, highballs, barrels (2 wds.)	170 190 7 95 116 142 166 206 14 29
C. Catches, nets	38 62 111 129 150 8 75 187
D. Irish novelist and songwriter (1797-1868; <i>Handy Andy</i>)	194 5 99 113 163
E. Whomps, larrups, drubs	41 58 112 193 17 33 96 135 161
F. One of the seven hills on which Rome was built	165 205 184 102 126 137 3 18 45
G. Capital of Cameroon	178 192 200 110 146 27 55
H. Chest in which to stow things	10 36 77 202 73 177
I. About to get some hard knocks (3 wds.)	212 12 93 125 180 30 53
J. Winded (3 wds.)	56 78 88 114 121 143 127 48 211 100 158 176 44
K. Tipsters	50 66 132 141 28
L. "Neither do men put _____ into old bottles" (2 wds.; Matt. 9:17)	37 90 148 63 85 156 186
M. 1949 film musical with Gene Kelly and Frank Sinatra (3 wds.)	11 69 80 97 133 144 173 198 213
N. Political leader (1726-90) active in Massachusetts for whom a Maine college was named	2 25 84 130 151 159 175

CLUES	WORDS
O. Sorcery of Africa and the West Indies, for example	42 74 108 179 122
P. "Manna and _____, in argosy transferr'd" (Keats, "Eve of St. Agnes")	134 26 43 123 154
Q. 1932 James T. Farrell novel (2 wds.)	195 61 174 92 214 16 149 160 167 65 81 105
R. Seaport in western Ecuador	115 21 67 86 98
S. February birthstone	68 152 164 188 107 199 46 59
T. 1953 musical whose music was based on themes by Borodin	140 189 83 208 153 169
U. Caustic	197 79 124 119 64 20 51 57 94 139
V. Young, weaned pig	120 54 91 1 162
W. "One caught a _____, the other caught a mouse" (Lear, "The Two Old Bachelors")	209 182 6 128 22 89
X. Handbook, manual	171 196 31 72 60 24 104 70 138 155 191
Y. Type of window	40 145 39 210 157 203 183 4
Z. Suffers severe tribulation (3 wds.)	201 207 168 109 34 87 181 13 47 185 101 118 23 9 106
Z'. Standard of measurement or of judgment	82 76 204 19 131 147 49 172 32