

It should be clear that no single pencil and paper test can assess teacher competence.

Assuring teacher competence

by Leonard M. Chaffee

Recent articles in both popular and professional publications reflect the interest of citizens and educators in the topic of teacher competence. Several states now require new teachers to pass some type of examination prior to being certified. In Kansas, recent deliberations of the State Board of Education serve as a public expression that, at least some people, believe that "something needs to be done" to make certain that only competent teachers are permitted to teach in our schools. Although it seems ridiculous for those of us in the education profession to have to reaffirm our belief that teachers must be competent, the response should be quite simple! Of course, we all want to assure the competency of those who teach our children.

The competencies necessary for successful teaching are complex. Scannell and Guenther¹ have defined the broad expectations of a professional teacher as follows: "Possesses self-understanding; has knowledge of life-long human growth, development and learning and applies this knowledge to teaching children and adolescents; is skilled in human relations; understands curriculum planning and is skilled in choosing and adapting instructional strategies to implement varying curricula; understands the educational needs of exceptional learners, the procedures used to identify them, and the recommended educational methods for instructing them in the least restrictive environments; evaluates student learners and uses educational research methodologies to improve instruction and student learning; understands the scope of the teaching profession and the school as a social-political organization; is a liberally educated person; and, has adequate knowledge of at least one subject area included in the public school curriculum."

Another writer² has stated: "The professional education program should include: (1) the comprehensive study of pedagogy, including direct experiences in teaching and learning which relate theory to practice, (2) a concentra-

tion in one or more teaching fields, (3) a solid foundation in the liberal arts and sciences, including basic skills and (4) an inter-disciplinary view of the undergirding disciplines of education."

I provide these lists of competencies only to underscore the complexity of the role assigned teachers. Although I am in favor of using some type of test as part of the process to determine minimum competency, we must be careful to avoid "quick fix" solutions. A certification examination will not replace well-conceived programs which assure the continuous evaluation of those preparing to be teachers. Such an examination must be only one component of an evaluation system which includes the application of appropriate standards for entry into teacher education programs, the continuous monitoring of student progress throughout the program and means for evaluating the success of students' student teaching experiences.

Given the complexity of the teaching role, it should be abundantly clear that no single pencil and paper test can assess teacher competence! In considering a certification process designed to assure the competence of beginning teachers, it is especially important that plans for such a process include an extended opportunity for teacher candidates to demonstrate, in the real school world, their abilities to apply specific competencies within the areas noted earlier. A mechanism must be provided through which students may relate theory to actual practice in clinical settings. An initial teaching certificate should be awarded only after successful completion of this teaching experience conducted under the supervision of a team of mentors composed of a master teacher, a supervisor/administrator and a teacher educator. If such a supervisory team cannot give a positive evaluation, the process should permit an additional period of teaching under supervised conditions in another educational setting.

In Kansas, the State Board of Education has the responsibility for accrediting colleges and universities that prepare school personnel for certification. Policies related to institutional accreditation are extensive and include standards related to admission, retention, exit and follow-up policies and practices.³ The Board's evaluation process includes an on-campus visit by a team of professional educators for the purpose of ascertaining that standards are being met.

For several years, Kansas teacher education institutions have had in place several important components of the initial-certification process being discussed, including the assessment of competency in basic skills. Although some would include the assessment of basic skills competency as part of an examination to be administered under the auspices of the State Department of Education, I would urge that this portion of the process remain a responsibility of each teacher education institution. Indeed, our state universities now have a common policy in regard to the assessment of basic skills as a part of teacher education program admission requirements. In designing a new initial-certification process, it would be wise to build on what presently exists.

Although it may appear defensive, I want to remind our readers that we should proceed from a positive view as we review the processes for assuring teacher competence. I am troubled by those who use various statistics related to "falling test scores" and "reports of barely liter-

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ate students" being graduated from our schools. The vast majority of teachers in Kansas have been (and are) doing a fine job. Although some people would have us believe differently, it is helpful for me to remember the recent Gallup Poll⁴ which reported that parents with children in public schools view teachers and schools in their communities positively. Especially interesting are the results of a recent survey⁵ conducted by researchers at Emporia State University which indicated that 86 percent of Kansans who have children in public schools rate both the schools and the teachers of their children as A, B or C. Further, when asked to identify particular strengths of the public schools, the most frequent answer given was—teachers!

As we continue to seek improvements in the certification process and in all phases of education, let us remember that we are working to improve an already fine profession. It is imperative that we devise more effective means of both helping members of the public at large know better the successes of our schools and making the profession more attractive to both experienced and potential teachers. Questions of teacher competence cannot be divorced from the reward structure. In a recent study⁶ conducted in Kansas, inadequate salary was most often cited as the reason for experienced teachers leaving the profession. According to data provided by the Kansas State Department of Education,⁷ the average salary for teachers in the 1980-81 school year was \$15,252. The same report indicated that the average salary for 1981-82 is \$16,712 (estimated). The actual average will not be available until the end of the school year. Given these facts, we are fortunate indeed to have had many fine people enter the profession of education over the years.

Dealing only with the initial certification process and ignoring financial aspects will not improve our ability to attract and retain quality teachers. Again, although I support the use of an examination as part of the process for determining initial certification, this concept should not be considered in a vacuum.

Footnotes

- ¹ Dale P. Scannell and John E. Guenther, "The Development of an Extended Program," *Journal of Teacher Education*, Vol. XXXII; 1 (January-February 1981), 9.
- ² Dean C. Corrigan, "Creating the Conditions for Professional Practice: Education's Unfinished Agenda," *Journal of Teacher Education*, Vol. XXXII; 2 (March-April 1981), 30.
- ³ "Regulations for Certifying School Personnel and Accrediting Institutions and Approved Programs Offering Teacher Education," State Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas.
- ⁴ George H. Gallup, "The 13th Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 63; 1 (September 1981), 35.
- ⁵ "Kansans' Attitudes Toward Education," School of Education and Psychology, Emporia State University (January 1982).
- ⁶ William S. LaShier, Jr., Rod Heffley, and Wan Yung Ryoo, "Why Are Kansas Teachers Leaving the Profession?" A Report Submitted to the Kansas Professional Teaching Standards Advisory Board (January 1982).
- ⁷ "Average Classroom Teachers' and Principals' Salaries of the 306 Unified School Districts of Kansas for 1980-81 and 1981-82," Kansas State Department of Education (January 1982).