

C'ville students to get competency tests

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the education of a 12th grade student." He said the board generally supports the plan and pointed to the district's own community survey, initiated last summer, which gave wide-spread support of the concept.

THE SURVEY, which registered the strongest response of any community survey in the district, asked residents and district administrators and employees if they agreed or disagreed with the concept of competency testing as a requirement of graduation. The respondents voted 483-40 in favor of the measure; 22 gave no opinion.

"The community survey response is a definite plus going in," Sherman said. "Half the battle is community support."

Overall, the board is committed to the idea, Sherman said. Even concerns such as that raised by the question, "What happens to an 11th grader who moves into the district and doesn't pass the test?" are perceived as not insurmountable.

Ed Roeder, supervisor of Michigan's Education Assessment Program, said competency testing is not a recent discovery. It was used in rural Michigan counties from 1870 through the 1930s.

"If you attended K-8 in a country school and wanted to go to the 9-12 school in the city you have to pass the exit exam. It was a rigorous, two-day exam."

Since then, it has become "rediscovered" and more prevalent in the past decade, he added. Just in the past year, he added, he's received inquiries into competency testing from as many as 40-50 Michigan districts.

Like the Clarencville officials, Roeder agrees public attention on today's quality of education is causing people to examine instituting competency testing.

"AS A RESULT, a lot of local boards of education are wondering if they're graduating students with the necessary skills," Roeder said.

The state Board of Education's own policy on the matter, however, is to

defer to local school districts because that's where individual graduation requirements are set.

But as a conduit of information about the procedure, Roeder says he also advises local districts to proceed cautiously.

"I would advise any district to proceed with the assumption that they'll be sued," he said. "They should be thorough and have legal documentation to withstand legal challenges."

In other states, competency testing court challenges have centered on three key issues:

• Districts have been challenged for presumably testing children on material not taught.

• Districts have been challenged by the families of handicapped children who argue their children weren't offered the same level of education as non-handicapped students, and therefore were unjustly held back.

• A district's basic authority to conduct the tests at all has been challenged.

Overall, the challenges have not held

up. "No testing program I know has been thrown out," Roeder said.

Nonetheless, the suits have been disruptive, costly and involved long stretches of time.

THE MOST widely known controversy stemmed from a Florida case filed on behalf of 11 black Hillsboro County high school students in 1978. The attorney for the students contended the functional literacy test was racially discriminatory and culturally biased, and that the tested material was not adequately presented in all schools. A year later a U.S. District Court judge there ruled in favor of the school system, saying it properly documented that the 24 skills measured in the test were being taught in the schools.

The state officer said his department doesn't keep figures on the number of districts in Michigan that use competency testing in graduation requirement, but could list a few in lower Michigan and the Detroit area, including: the Detroit Public Schools and schools in Brighton, Haslett, Sturgis and Flint.

Therefore, students were transferred to different schools and received new teachers.

Today, Murtaugh says, Flint school officials are proud to say there's no such thing as a "social promotion" in their schools. "Students just know more," he proclaims.

As recommended by the state Department of Education, Flint Schools held community discussions on the question before instituting a plan. "We had town hall meetings in every school building in 1978-79. Now it's become such an accepted part of what we do that we seldom get asked questions about it anymore," Murtaugh said.

Officials say tests help grades

By Teri Banas
staff writer

A Flint Public School official said the competency testing program that district instituted in 1979 has resulted in increased scores on the annual Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP), and the lowest scoring group has all but disappeared.

"One of the first effects we noticed happening was that other test scores started to rise," said Leonard Murtaugh, director of curriculum in the 30,000-student district.

"The MEAP scores for grades four, seven and 10 just grew beyond our expectations."

According to Murtaugh, students who once correctly answered only 0-25 percent of the MEAP test objectives have improved substantially. "They're now scoring a lot better," he said. "The greatest growth was in the 50-75 percent quadrant."

As a result, a district staff committee is now looking into "upgrading" and making more difficult its own testing program.

With the exception of one test at one grade level, the scores have remained high districtwide, he said.

FLINT is just one Michigan school district to use competency testing, now

under consideration in the 2,000-member Clarencville Schools. In Flint, each grade level is tested for competency; successfully passing a test at the high school level is a requirement for graduation.

In the first year of the program, the administrator said they found "quite a substantial" increase in the number of students held back a grade. "The rate of retention doubled," he said.

In response to that, they hired more teachers to assist in remedial classes, and made summer classes available for those wanting to prevent retention.

More than just holding a student back, they also found it necessary to change a student's school experiences.

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