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THE TESTING OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS: FOUR STATEMENTS

Editors' Introduction

In accordance with a law passed in 1986, after September 1, 1991, anyone wishing to be certified to teach in Michigan must pass both a basic skills test and a subject matter test in each subject he or she wishes to teach. On February 13, 1992, Ellen Brinkley, then MCTE President-Elect and a professor of English at Western Michigan University, Constance Weaver, Chair of English Education at WMU, Marilyn Wilson, MCTE College Section Chair and Director of English Education at Michigan State University, and Sheila Fitzgerald, past president of both MCTE and the National Council of Teachers of English and professor of education at MSU, testified at a hearing called by Senator Dan L. DeGrow, Chair of the Senate Standing Committee on Education, concerning the the Michigan Tests for Teacher Certification in English and Language Arts. The State Department of Education and Senator DeGrow remain committed to the development of subject matter testing of pre-service teachers and are in the process of planning revision sessions on the Language Arts and Reading tests in December 1992 and March 1993, conducted by a Massachusetts testmaking firm. Apprised of the situation by MCTE, Miles Myers, Executive Director of NCTE, called for "a moratorium on the development of the new Michigan Teacher Certification Test" and recommended that alternative assessments being developed by NCTE and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards be considered. In a July 2, 1992 letter, Carolyn E. Logan, Director of Michigan Teacher/Administrator Preparation and Certification Services, asserted that "we could not agree with you more on the merits of case study assessment" but "we are limited to machine-scored subject area tests." The editors of *LJMJ* feel MCTE members may benefit from reading the testimony of Professors Brinkley, Wilson, Weaver, and Fitzgerald and from considering the issues that such commitment to testing at the state level raises about the directions Michigan education may be taking in the future.

Statement One: Ellen H. Brinkley

The Michigan Council of Teachers of English is a professional organization of English teachers throughout the state who teach at all levels. It is on MCTE's behalf that I express great alarm at the content and format of the proposed Michigan Teacher Competency Testing Program. We feel so strongly about this issue, in fact, that we have passed a resolution calling for a halt to further development of the currently proposed teacher competency tests.

The State of Michigan, through its Department of Education, has developed well-researched essential goals and objectives for reading, writing, speaking, and listening. These guidelines were developed by professional leaders in the state—spending considerable time, effort, and expense—to nudge teachers and curriculum coordinators toward the best that we know about the teaching of English and language arts. Therefore, we are amazed that the proposed teacher competency tests do not reflect, and indeed seem to disregard, the model of teaching and learning that appears in the State's own essential goals and objectives.

Some of our members have served on State committees to help design and develop the MEAP tests given to students. These committees of professional leaders have recognized the great harm that can be done by standardized tests that do not accurately measure students' reading and writing performance. The committees have worked long and hard to develop tests that come closer to being authentic forms of assessment. Therefore, we are disturbed that the proposed teacher tests—albeit ones drawn from other states—do not similarly reflect current research on assessment.

We have voiced in letters and press releases a variety of concerns which, no doubt, you will hear more than once at today's hearing. One of these is the tests' emphasis on bits and pieces of information that create tests that are more like a game of Trivial Pursuit than places to demonstrate a deep understanding of a body of knowledge. Another is concern that even if content knowledge could be adequately measured by means of a multiple-choice test, such a test would provide no evidence that the test-takers understand how to nurture students' critical and creative thinking.

While some of these concerns cut across discipline areas, there are others that seem more specific to English and Language Arts. The inclusion of journalism on the Language Arts test, for example, is inappropriate when that test is taken by elementary education students. Another especially problematic issue is whether students in elementary and secondary programs should take the same test and the related issue of whether those with a minor in English should take the same test as a major. At Western Michigan University, for example, elementary education students frequently choose a minor in English, yet much of their coursework is different from that taken by secondary English majors and minors. Because today's elementary teachers are expected to teach literature-based language arts programs, their focus appropriately is on the study of literature for children and adolescents. To test elementary education minors on the same literature read and taught by secondary teachers is not reasonable or valid.

What might we propose instead? Representatives of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English stand ready to help design or develop English language arts test content and procedures that will come closer to reflecting current knowledge and research about English language arts and about authentic assessment.

The people of Michigan have a right to evidence that English language arts preservice teachers know their subject well and that they are being well-trained in their undergraduate programs. The currently proposed NES (National Evaluation Systems, Inc.) tests, however, will not provide a valid measure for either purpose.

We wouldn't think of testing doctors today just by asking questions about the medications, treatments, and procedures that we knew about ten or fifteen years ago. Similarly, we must not test teachers today just by asking questions that reflect only what we knew ten or fifteen years ago about the teaching of reading, writing, and literature.

If tests are needed, please at least be sure they do not adversely affect literacy learning in Michigan's classrooms but will instead nudge teachers and teacher education programs in a positive direction.

Statement Two: Marilyn Wilson

No one is opposed to ensuring that teachers are knowledgeable in their disciplines. In fact, we would all agree that content knowledge is absolutely critical for competence in teaching.

My remarks will focus on the inadequacy of the content area tests being considered by National Evaluation Systems, Inc. The multiple choice tests soon to be implemented are grossly inadequate and potentially damaging for the education of our undergraduates and the students they will eventually teach. While I speak as a member of the Department of English with expertise in English subject matter, I am fully confident that my remarks have relevance for other disciplines as well.

My first concern is the range of disciplinary knowledge. As in most disciplines, the range of knowledge in English is extremely wide. To expect undergraduates to know the breadth and depth of American literature, British literature, and world and multi-cultural literature that spans centuries is to hold our undergraduate students to a higher standard of knowledge than we have for our Ph.D. students. Who decides which literature, which authors are important enough to be tested on? With the explosion of knowledge in English, with its growing demand for multicultural literacy and literatures, it is preposterous to expect beginning teachers to know the range and depth of literature that only a lifetime of reading can begin to accomplish.

Secondly, an inherent danger in testing is that tests eventually dictate curriculum. If the literature portion of the test is skewed in a particular direction, students will have little choice but to focus on the areas to be tested. As Walter Loban said in a publication from the National Council of Teachers of English in 1977, "The curriculum inevitably shrinks to the boundaries of whatever evaluation the schools use." To put not too fine a point on it, university curriculum may eventually be determined by the whimsical decisions of Massachusetts test developers rather than by experts in the discipline itself.

Third, using multiple choice tests indicates a major underestimation of the complexity of content area knowledge. The content of English is not merely factual knowledge of authors and their writing. It is, rather, understanding the processes of literary creation and processes of analysis. It is knowing how to read and critique literature so that, as readers, graduates

can continue to explore a wide range of literatures beyond the university classroom, and so that, as teachers, they can encourage their own students to become lifelong, critical readers. It is understanding the processes of writing, understanding the role of writing for learning, and being able to write effectively themselves as they prepare to help their own students become effective writers. And it is understanding language, how it is acquired and used by speakers in multi-cultural settings. The subject matter of English is not a collection of facts; it is the ability to do literature, to do writing, to do language, and to understand how they all function in a pluralistic society. No multiple choice test can adequately assess this knowledge.

In summary, to require a multiple choice test as a measure of competence in the discipline is to trivialize the discipline. National testing clearly indicates that children's success at learning facts is far greater than their ability to think critically. The multiple choice tests being developed by NES reinforce factual learning at the expense of critical thinking. Is this the message we want to leave with our students today who will become our children's teachers tomorrow? Learning subject matter should not become a game of trivial pursuit.

Statement Three: Constance Weaver

The Michigan Teacher Competency Testing Program, as exemplified by current versions of National Evaluation Systems tests in the English language arts (English, Language Arts, and Reading), reflects and promotes an inappropriate model for education. That is, it sends teachers and the public the wrong message about what education should be.

Factual knowledge and basic skills are not enough. Across disciplines, results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress in recent years have clearly demonstrated that while most students are generally mastering so-called basic skills and learning simple facts, few students are developing the ability to think critically and to pose or even solve problems. Recognizing this, the National Council of Teachers of English and other professional organizations have developed standards and position statements calling for new kinds of educational policies and practices (e.g. *The English Coalition Conference: Democracy through Language*, published in 1989 by the NCTE).

The thrust of research in various academic disciplines has for years indicated that facts and skills are not best learned prior to the development of more complex thinking processes, but rather in conjunction with them. Both children and those who will teach them need to acquire factual knowledge in the context of investigating, conceptualizing, hypothesizing, testing, and constructing knowledge. Otherwise, what is studied for the test today is forgotten tomorrow.

Unfortunately, education in Michigan is still suffering from the minimal skills objectives for K-12 education that were issued by the Michigan Department of Education in the 1970s, without regard for the growing body of research demonstrating that skills are best developed in the context of actually engaging in complex processes like reading and writing. The goals and objectives developed in the 1980s come much closer to reflecting the body of knowledge supporting this constructivist view of learning today, but implementation has been greatly hampered by the concept of language arts education promoted by the goals and objectives of the prior decade. To adopt the analogous teacher competency tests already in production would be to regress to the earlier concept of education that has served us so poorly. We need to advance: to build upon and improve the goals and objectives of the 1980s and to help teachers understand and be guided by them.

Thus, both teacher education itself and teacher competency tests in the English language arts need to focus on reading and thinking about literature, thinking about language, understanding language and literacy processes, and recognizing what all of this means for teaching. *It is critical that content area testing include testing on the context of educational theory and pedagogy in each discipline.* Furthermore, the test must encourage prospective teachers to conceptualize their undergraduate education not as the accumulation of all the factual knowledge they will need in order to teach, but as the beginning of a lifelong process of learning, in their role as professionals. Only then are they likely to promote a similar kind of education among the students they teach.

For these reasons, the English Education faculty at Western Michigan University call for a moratorium on implementing the Michigan Teacher Competency Program until more appropriate assessment measures can be developed. It is critical that ample time and resources be allotted for leading teacher educators and educators in the state to collaborate in producing assessments that will promote the kind of teacher education and K-12

education needed to meet the demands upon citizens of our state and nation in the twenty-first century.

Statement Four: Sheila Fitzgerald

My name is Sheila Fitzgerald. I am a professor of teacher education, and I am here as a spokesperson for the members of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English. I am a past president of that organization and a past president of its parent organization, the National Council of Teachers of English, an eighty year old association with over 100,000 members devoted to improving the language abilities (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) of students from kindergarten through college.

I would like to speak to you today on three issues related to the Michigan Teacher Competency test: the narrow focus of the language components of the test; the inappropriateness of the test for students preparing for elementary school teaching; and the costs of the test for students and taxpayers.

I am as disturbed as a previous speaker, Dr. Wilson, about the narrow perspectives of competency tests that the State of Michigan has initiated as measures of Michigan's education students. To alert you to the wide range of preparation needed by teachers of language, I will leave with you a summary statement of *Guidelines for the Preparation of Teachers of English Language Arts*, a document developed by the National Council of Teachers of English. This one page summary will clarify for you the wide range of complex competencies needed by teachers of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Even a cursory examination of the summary will show that most of the competencies needed for teaching language cannot be tested with paper and pencil, certainly not with multiple choice, computer scored tests. The gravest danger in the Michigan Teacher Competency tests is that they force teacher educators to use the limited instructional time in teacher education courses to focus students on mastering facts rather than on understanding the complex issues in planning and implementing quality language opportunities in classrooms. Unfortunately for students and teachers alike, as noted language researcher Walter Loban has said, "The curriculum inevitably shrinks to the methods used for evaluation."

As a long-term veteran of elementary school teaching, and as one who has spent nearly a quarter of a century preparing teachers for elementary schools, I also strongly agree with another former speaker at this hearing, Dr. Weaver. She states that students preparing for teaching in elementary schools are especially hurt by the Michigan Teacher Competency tests that have been legislated.

Elementary teacher need to be *generalists* in education in very special ways. In contrast to secondary teachers who, most often, are subject area specialists, elementary teachers are specialists in helping children put learnings together. Through language in all its forms (listening, speaking, reading, writing), they guide children's schooling by interweaving the present with the past, science with the arts, civics with math, school with life outside of school, responsibilities with rights. Elementary teachers help to put together today's American children, many of whom live very fragmented lives outside of school.

Because the education of elementary children is richly integrated, the education of elementary teachers needs to be broad, across many subjects, rather than deep in a single subject or two, and strongly focused on child development (language development, physical development, social and emotional development). That education needs to be very rich in the arts and offer extensive opportunities to analyze social issues of children and families, and to experience social programs outside of schools that impact children's lives. The Michigan Teacher Competency tests attempt to measure elementary teachers in only one major field and one minor field, plus something identified as "basic skills." (Note that the basic skills test requires no measures of listening and speaking. What could be more "basic" for a teacher—or for a legislator for that matter—than listening and speaking abilities?) Listening and speaking competencies needed for teaching cannot be measured with a paper and pencil test. Few students preparing for teaching have had any good instruction in listening and speaking in their own K-12 education, so they cannot be expected to understand instruction in oral language or value it. After all, the MEAP tests in elementary and secondary schools didn't test them in listening or speaking either! The basic skills portion of the Michigan Teacher Competency test, among its deficiencies, ignores the basic skills of listening and speaking that teachers must use effectively in day to day instruction.

Also consider how the subject matter portions of the Michigan Teacher Competency tests speak to undergraduates in teacher education about what is very important in their preparation program for elementary school teaching: only two subject areas, a major and minor, neither of which is "education." The academic major and minor, which many colleges and universities are now requiring, are only two of ten or more subject areas elementary teachers are responsible for teaching. The Michigan Teacher Competency tests ignore the other subject areas and all the areas of teaching that are crucial for teachers but are not subject areas as defined by the test, such as classroom management, creating a supportive learning environment, and working with parents. Selecting only a very narrow range of expectations for students says to them that all the other subject areas and teaching skills that their preparation program should offer them, except those that are tested, are far less important. Senator DeGrow demonstrates the legislature's lack of understanding of the breadth of competencies needed by elementary teachers when he is quoted in the *Detroit Free Press* as saying, "We think we'll be able to weed out a few people who just aren't ready for the classroom because they don't know *the subject*" (emphasis added). His statement shows a complete misunderstanding of what elementary teachers need to be able to do.

Teacher educators have never been able to provide adequate balance in their preparation programs for elementary teachers; they always seem to be at the mercy of mindless directives from outside forces prepared under guise of fostering "excellence." The Michigan Teacher Competency test is another serious evidence of misguidance in elementary teacher preparation.

Contrary to what politicians believe, and the media perpetuates, tests do not improve education; they diminish it considerably. Preparing for tests and regurgitating pieces of knowledge on tests should be only a small part of learning; tests cannot be hyped as they currently are without seriously limiting students' perspectives on their responsibilities as learners.

This country is in the grip of a rapidly escalating testing industry. Statisticians and testing companies promote new tests, new applications of current tests, and updated versions of old tests—to sell tests and test development. (They find especially willing listeners among politicians who know they can get the attention of nearly every voter by mandating tests that appear to foster higher standards in education even when they don't.)

When old markets are saturated—as the K-12 school market now seems to be—the testing companies look for new sales territories. In the 1990s that territory is teacher education. We can expect that when the undergraduates in teaching are in the testing industry's ken, classroom teachers will be the next target. Testers know that "Americans believe in numbers, and what does not come out in numbers they choose to believe does not exist" (Carll Tucker, *New York Times* correspondent). Although testing companies admit in the fine print of their testing manuals that tests can measure very little of what is important, they happily play on the unquestioned respect that politicians and much of the public have for statistics. Testers claim they cannot be held responsible if politicians, school administrators, and the unsuspecting public interpret test results improperly or reduce the curriculum to prepare students for the test; they just develop and sell tests.

What Michigan taxpayers and education students pay to the Massachusetts company, National Evaluation Systems, for the Michigan Teacher Competency tests is of great concern to me; I hope these costs are of concern to you also! I am especially disturbed about the cost to the undergraduate students, the hidden tax of nearly \$200 they have to pay to register to take the tests. This is over and above the ever-increasing tuition they pay for their education, including what they pay for all the tests they take in their courses as they progress through that education. Over 5,000 teachers graduate in teacher education from Michigan colleges each year. That amounts to \$1,000,000 every year out of the pockets of education students in Michigan. One million dollars of Michigan students' money will go to National Evaluation Services of Amherst, Massachusetts, with some siphoned off for oversight costs by the Michigan Department of Education.

In addition to what the students pay to take the test, Michigan taxpayers are picking up the development costs for the Teacher Competency tests—although no one seems to want to release accurate information on how much taxpayers are paying out. At first, the Michigan Council of Teachers of English was told that development costs for the teacher competency tests would be between \$5-7,000,000. Gary Hawks, Interim Superintendent of Public Instruction, disputed that figure, stating in his letter to Dr. Wilson: "...the exorbitant cost which is referenced is mythical because no contract involving the payment of state funds has been let in conjunction with this program. Instead, payment for services rendered for the development of tests will be retrieved from actual administration" (12/17/91). When

questioned on this issue, Senator DeGrow said that neither figure was right, that development costs paid to the testing company was in the millions of dollars but less than the \$5-7 million figure. Why aren't Michigan taxpayers given accurate information on the monetary costs of the Michigan Teacher Competency test? The public needs to hear more than unsupported claims of "fostering excellence" as rationale for their investment.

Every citizen of Michigan wants improvements in education and in teacher education. Everyone also wants improvements in health care, in automobile safety, and in government services as well; no element of public services is protected from criticism. Certainly those of us who are teachers and those of us who are teacher educators want to be the best we can be for the students we teach and the public who pays our salaries. Yet, we can be better educators only if those who legislate our lives truly do their homework, study the needs and goals we have for our students, needs and goals defined by our professional associations over long years studying the best of theory, research, and practice in our field.

The Michigan Teacher Competency test will do nothing to advance learning for children in Michigan but put a veneer of state surveillance on teacher preparation programs, an expensive veneer purchased by taxpayers. Nor will these tests improve teacher education. At best they will be one more hurdle for students to jump over— that is, if teacher educators have the luxury of paying little attention to the tests. At worst— and this scenario is more probable— teacher preparation programs will try to enroll only students with proven track records in test taking, will narrow the content of their classes to prepare students for the tests, will compete with other Michigan teacher preparation institutions by flaunting their test scores, will worry less about the children the teachers they prepare will teach and more about providing statistics which merely appear to determine quality in teacher education.

The Michigan Teacher Competency tests were legislated into existence by Public Act 267 in 1986. There was little publicity, even less public dialogue about the perceived need for them and any potential value— and certainly no report to the taxpayers of Michigan on the exact costs to student teachers and to the public coffers. If 1986 legislation could originate the test, certainly 1992 legislation can undo the mistake. For all of the reasons I have stated, I urge you to take this course.