

MOVING BEYOND MINIMAL COMPETENCY TESTING

Speaker: Tom Fisher, *Florida Department of Education*

Instructor/Recorder: Dianne Wilkes, *The Florida State University*

Tom Fisher opened the session with a brief history of student assessment in Florida dating from the Educational Accountability Act of 1976. Enacted in response to state-wide concern over declining performance levels of Florida public school students, the Educational Accountability Act mandated a state-wide program of student assessment to ensure that instructional objectives would be met throughout students' public school education.

First implemented in 1977, the State Student Assessment Test, Part I, a multiple-choice census test, evaluates students' performance in basic communications and mathematics skills at grade levels 3, 5, 8, and 10. Students who do not achieve acceptable performance levels receive remedial instruction until they demonstrate mastery of the skills, as certified by their teachers. The State Student Assessment Test, Part II, which functions as a high school exit exam, also measures communications and mathematics skills. To pass this exam, students must demonstrate mastery of one half of the skills and correctly answer 70% of the items. According to the Florida Department of Education statistics, 78% of the students taking the mathematics component of the test pass on their first attempt, while 95% pass the communications section. After five administrations of the test, 98.5% of the students pass both sections. Department of Education records also indicate a dramatic increase in minority students' performance since the test was first administered.

Fisher emphasized that, other than the problems inherent in administering and maintaining security on a state-wide test, the most difficult aspect of the testing program has been designing a test which can withstand the scrutiny of both the public and the courts—hence, the name change from "Functional Literacy Test" to "Statewide Student Assessment Test, Part II," the creation of numerous committees to oversee the construction of the tests, the modification of percent scoring to table scoring, and the decision to begin testing in the tenth rather than eleventh grade to give students five opportunities to pass the test. Despite the safeguards, the SSAT-III has been the subject of three lawsuits, the most famous being the *Turlington vs. Debra P.* case, all of which the State has successfully defended.

Addressing Florida's efforts to reach the upper national quartile in student performance, Fisher described the standards of Excellence testing program, which is currently being designed by the Department of Education. To measure student competencies which denote quality achievement, the Standards of Excellence Test will evaluate performance in social studies, science, writing, and mathematics. At present, the Department of Education is considering the question of skills clarification, the method of selecting students to take the test, assessment strategies, grading procedures, and scoring. Pilot testing of the Standards of Excellence Test is planned for the 1984-85 school year, with field testing scheduled for 1986.

Fisher concluded the session by answering questions from the audience on the costs of the assessment programs.