
Of Minima and Maxima: The Social Significance of Minimal Competency Testing and the Search for Educational Excellence

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In this essay, I explore the many meanings of the minimal competency testing movement and the more recent mobilization for educational excellence in the schools. Both of these movements have gathered strong social support for what appear to be the wrong reasons. While each of these movements focuses on declining educational achievement as the root cause of the school's failure—leading to the devaluation of the high school diploma—the dynamics are much more complex. In this respect, escalating rates of high school completion (with robust attainment rates) are far more responsible for the low value of the diploma than the perceived decline in educational achievement. Nonetheless, the movements for the minima and maxima of educational achievement can have an indirect impact on attainment rates—and thus the value of the diploma—through the setting of performance standards on minimal competency tests and the elevating of academic graduation standards. However, a more valuable diploma brought about in these ways may strongly conflict with our policies that encourage equality of educational and economic opportunity. It may be that the movements to secure the minima and maxima of educational achievement will incur costs that no one desires. From the vantage point of educational attainment, we are confronted with large political and social choices—choices that go well beyond a mere concern for minima and maxima.

The movement from minima toward maxima in the great debate on the American school has taken a scant few years. Though the controversy swirling about minimal competency testing continues to occupy the

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