

4-1-1978

A Case for the 'Rubber Diploma'

Joan C. Elliot

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections>

Recommended Citation

Elliot, Joan C. (1978) "A Case for the 'Rubber Diploma,'" *New Directions*: Vol. 5: Iss. 3, Article 6.
Available at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol5/iss3/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Howard @ Howard University. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Directions by an authorized editor of Digital Howard @ Howard University. For more information, please contact digitalservices@howard.edu.

A Case for the 'Rubber Diploma'

By Joan C. Elliott

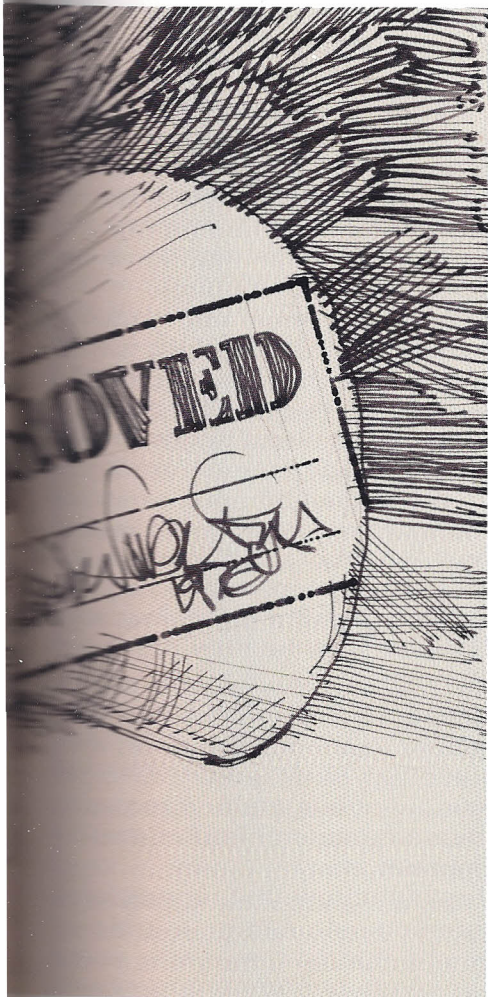
Across the United States, the lack of the most rudimentary information on the part of many high school graduates alarms educators, employers, parents and the students themselves. Parents are in the process in some cases of suing the school system for its failure to educate their offspring. The indiscriminate presentation of the so called "rubber diploma" to high school graduates shocks employers. Young prospective employees, when applying for positions, often fail to show competency in reading and computation. In response to this situation, school administrators throughout the country—reconfirming the educational policies of the 1930s—state that what the system needs is promotion based on a student's performance, and not by age.

In the late 1930s, the school system adopted the philosophy of social promotion, since some children did not perform well due to factors beyond their control. At that time, the system attempted to be psychologically sensitive to the makeup of the underperforming child. The child was promoted according to age so that he would at least be in class with his peers physically, if not intellectually. And school systems which placed a child in the lowest track gave him a stigma of in-

feriority which was difficult for the child to overcome.

Now the philosophy has emerged again to promote on performance rather than age, with school administrators favoring standardized tests twice a year to determine whether the student has mastered the grade's material. This program is called the minimal competency test and has produced a flurry of tests to handle the new direction of many school systems. Under the program, students who do not function on a certain designated level on the minimal competency test are required to repeat their grades, grouped with students with similar score grades and placed in a remedial course of study. This program, which focuses on basic reading, mathematics and writing, begins supposedly in the fourth grade. In this way, the student would not have to wait until the day of graduation to be told he is on the list for certificate of attendance rather than the list for high school diploma.

To any concerned person in the community, this plan may sound ideal. Most people would agree that the problem is critical and that the individual communities need a plan to teach the basic skills needed to survive in a complex society. Most people would approve the idea that the school system return to teaching the



basics. In spite of this, the Black community should look below the surface before it endorses the minimal competency test for high school graduates.

No matter how conscious the test maker is in the elimination of bias in the test, it is impossible to separate what the child learns at home from what he learns at school. Prior conditions, such as the amount and quality of instruction in reading, language spoken in the home, the reading habits of the parents, or the presence or absence of other influential factors, may influence test performance. Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect that test performance will not be affected by inadequate opportunities to learn. Since a test can supply only information about current level of performance, decisions would have to be made on other related factors.

Most Black parents agree that the child should be held back until he masters his material. However, to hold the child back until he loses interest or until he agrees on "shop" or simply drops out of school is another facet of the problem.

Notwithstanding pessemism, the child is not necessarily safe in the hands of a counselor either. Even if a child does well, he can still be the victim of an insensitive counselor. Caste conscious counselors may recommend "shop" to

Black students instinctively. Counselors who dislike foreign languages, literature and mathematics may pass these feelings to the child.

The term, "Minimal Competency Test," is in the process of becoming another code word as "busing," "quality education," "law and order" and so on. On the surface, it looks like an excellent idea. But to a racist school official, it can provide an opportunity to regain ground lost after the 1954 Supreme Court decision on school desegregation. It is no accident that 78% of the students enrolled in the Occupational Training Program are Blacks. Perhaps the competency test is included to judge the quality of performance of the pupils, but the intent could just as easily be to resegregate the school system.

Most communities who have had a trial run on the test know that 21% of the white students do not perform up to the par on the test, while 79% of the Blacks do not. It is possible for school administrators to set the cut-off line where the majority of whites would pass and sacrifice the least number of poor-performing white students in order to include the majority number of Blacks. This cut-off line would place mostly Black children in remedial classes. The testing and promotion policies in school systems which have adopt-

ed the plan have resulted in the resegregation of classrooms. There has been an increase in the number of dropouts, the number of holdbacks and a decrease in the number of Blacks enrolled in college preparatory courses. An official of a predominately Black university reports that the institution would have lost 60% of the freshman class in 1977 if the minimal competency test had been in force.

The school system may monitor the progress of the child's reading level beginning in the first grade, but generally it is in the fourth grade that the school system makes serious recommendations about the child's progress. From here on, the pupil will have difficulties in the school system or he will remain behind his grade level. The school system knows that children of extreme poverty do not do as well as children of middle income means. There are signs that many poor readers can have difficulties remedied if appropriate action is applied. Until a test is constructed which minimizes factors which may unfairly handicap poor children, then sensitive citizens should not endorse the Minimal Competency Test for high school graduates.

The test enforces the inability of the child to learn, rather than reveal the lack of an opportunity to learn. Most children are not lethargic at first about reading.

Black people must realize that few persons leave the education of their children solely to the school system. . .

The school system is no more interested in a Black child than the entire society which it represents. The school system is merely a microcosm of American society with all its prejudices and biases.

Preconditions at home encourage or discourage interest in reading, listening comprehension and a long attention span. If the teachers know how to teach reading and how to overcome the preconditions for lack of learning, then they should proceed with the teaching of reading. Taking additional competency or standardized tests will not improve the skill of reading or computation, if the child really does not know the skill at all. The pupil will read neither better nor worse with or without a high school diploma.

Educational researchers and psychologists have to remind users of tests constantly that it is necessary to validate interpretations and analyze cautiously inferences before drawing generalizations from tests. Although test developers have tried to eliminate cultural bias, they have found it very difficult to come up with tests that are bias free. Tests are often erroneously considered as measurements of intelligence and mental ability, which in turn are thought to be unchanging, genetically-determined characteristics of persons.

Perhaps school officials are concerned with the minimum which a student should master in order to graduate from high school. However, this program could also be used as a limitation placed on Black persons graduating from high school. Black teenagers cannot find jobs in afflu-

ent America. This is an indictment on the economic system. The establishment can now claim that it cannot offer jobs to persons without a high school diploma. In this way the representatives of the economy do not have to feel guilty in front of these powerless, jobless youths. The employment situation is getting worse in the United States. A high school diploma is a necessity in the recessed job market.

Court cases have been filed on various aspects of the educational problem by parents who hold the school system accountable for the lack of knowledge of their children, particularly if they fail to read, write and compute properly. One case in California accuses the school system of placing young children in courses for the mentally retarded because the children happened to perform below standard on I.Q. tests.

Black people must realize that few persons leave the education of their children solely to the school system. Most persons who perform well in school learn all sorts of things from their parents between birth and the first grade. The education and the development of the child is too important to leave to an outside agency. The school system is no more interested in a Black child than the entire society which it represents. The school system is merely a microcosm of American society with all

its prejudices and biases.

A revitalization of the track system, coupled with a certificate of a high school attendance, will not solve the problem of reading, writing and arithmetic. Tests given by school systems in the country cannot at this point separate information acquired at home and that which is learned at school. Until this happens, youngsters should not have to carry the stigma of the track system or the "exit certificate." □

Joan C. Elliott, Ph.D., is professor of German at Tennessee State University in Nashville.