

# ED289886 1983-12-00 Minimum Competency Testing and the Handicapped.

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## Table of Contents

If you're viewing this document online, you can click any of the topics below to link directly to that section.

[Minimum Competency Testing and the Handicapped.....](#) 1



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## Minimum Competency Testing and the Handicapped.

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Most states have instituted some type of minimum competency testing (MCT) program; in many, students must pass the MCT in order to receive a high school diploma. This Digest reviews some of the approaches taken to accommodate handicapped students in MCT programs, and some of the legal issues involved.

### INCLUDING OR EXCLUDING HANDICAPPED STUDENTS IN MCT PROGRAMS

A survey of the states with MCT requirements found that many had explicitly mentioned handicapped students in their legislation (Schenck 1981). These states have taken

various approaches to accommodate the needs of handicapped students: excluding them from the test requirement, using student's IEP as a standard for graduation, establishing different standards for handicapped students, modifying the testing procedures for handicapped students, or making no modification for handicapped students.

The choice of approach should be based on the modifications that the student needs in his or her educational program (Ewing and Smith 1981). Some students merely require slight modification of their learning environment; their educational goals are very similar to those of non-handicapped students. For these students, modification in the administration procedures of a test may be sufficient.

Other students require a substantially modified curriculum and/or instructional goals; their educational programs are noticeably different from the programs of non-handicapped students. For these students, different standards may need to be established. Finally, it may be most appropriate to exempt severely or profoundly handicapped students from MCT programs.

## ACCOMMODATING THE NEEDS OF HANDICAPPED STUDENTS

States have taken various approaches to accommodating handicapped students in their MCT programs.

One approach is to exclude handicapped students from the MCT requirement. This approach has not been used by any state for all handicapped students. However, some states have used this option for multiply-handicapped or trainable retarded students.

A different approach is to use successful completion of the student's individualized education program (IEP) as the standard for graduation (Schenck and Welch 1980). The IEP may or may not include a competency test of some kind as part of the graduation requirement.

In some states, the IEP specifies whether the student should receive a regular diploma or a certificate of attendance. In other states, the IEP specifies modified testing procedures. Twelve states with MCT programs use the IEP in some way to specify graduation requirements for special education students.

Some states require that handicapped students take the regular MCT, but establish different standards as graduation requirements. For example, they might lower the passing score or weight grades and teacher ratings more heavily than for non-handicapped students. In several states, a special diploma or certificate of attendance is awarded to special education students who do not pass the MCT.

One very common approach is to modify the test administration procedures to accommodate some types of handicaps. For instance, audio cassette or Braille versions

of the test are provided for blind students; the test is administered in sign language for deaf students; the time limits are extended; answers are recorded by a proctor rather than the examinee; or certain types of test items are omitted from the test. Usually, such test modifications are left to the discretion of the local school district.

In a few states, a different competency test is used for students with specific handicaps. This approach can be legally problematic if handicapped students are not allowed to take the regular test and are granted a special diploma.

In some states, handicapped students must take the regular competency test. No special accommodations are made, and no special diplomas are granted. A similar approach leaves the decision about whether and how to test handicapped students to the local school district.

## LEGAL ISSUES

Adding a MCT to the graduation requirements of handicapped students does not seem to raise severe legal problems. "However, if MCT is used as a graduation requirement and certain students are not allowed to take the test (and thus are denied the opportunity to earn a diploma), a protected right might be impaired" (McCarthy 1980).

Another legal issue centers around providing remedial education to students who do not pass the MCT. Most states provide remedial programs for students who do not pass the test. Discrimination might be charged if the handicapped student is denied access to the remedial programs available to non-handicapped students because he or she is already involved in a special education program.

A final legal problem associated with including handicapped students in MCT programs is the inconsistent application of evaluation standards within local school districts or across school districts. This is a common problem when local school districts are allowed to modify or waive the test requirement with little or no guidance from the state.

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