

Beacon Hill Byline December 5, 1996

### **Should High School Seniors take the GED?**

When John Silber was a candidate for governor, I heard a voter say it would be exciting to have him as the state's chief executive – for about ten minutes! He is not our governor, but Dr. Silber has been appointed as head of the Board of Education, so he oversees our public schools from kindergarten through high school. In that job he is bringing excitement to the educators and students of Massachusetts.

The Board of Education action that is currently in the news relates to the GED, a test that is traditionally administered to adults or young adults who have not graduated from high school. Passing the examination serves as a substitute for a high school diploma. Acting at the request of Dr. Silber, the Board voted to require high school seniors to take the GED.

Response from around the state ranged from condemnation to applause. Some educators stated that the test should not be administered because it is too easy for our students. Others say it is a reasonable test of the performance of both schools and students.

As I write these words, the Board has rescinded its vote. While members had voted to administer the GED as a measure of performance without consequences for students, Dr. Silber expanded the impact of the test to include inserting a notation of failure in the student's transcript or even the withholding of diplomas. Based on what I have read about the episode, here are my thoughts about the issue.

First, our state administers the test to students who have dropped out of school and requires them to pass it in lieu of graduation. A student who completes high school should be able to pass it.

Second, high school seniors are entitled to advance knowledge of graduation requirements. When they have made it to the twelfth grade, they have enrolled in the English, history and math classes required for graduation. They should not have a new requirement suddenly added to the list.

Third, the state has made a huge financial commitment to education over the past few years. We have added requirements and raised standards. The state is entitled to measure the results of those measures, and the single tool presently available to us is the GED. While it is true that our education reform law requires a mastery test in 1999, that test has not been developed. We have indications that younger students are not performing up to new standards, and it seems to me that our educators, bureaucrats and legislators need to know right now how our students fare when they are measured by the single tool that is available to us, the GED.

I have not discussed the issue with educators. I have not talked with the bureaucrats. I have not even talked with other legislators. It simply seems like a good idea to find out where our students stand compared to the standing of their contemporaries who have dropped out of school. If we learn that they cannot pass the test, that knowledge will help us develop curriculum to prepare the graduates of the future for the harder exams they will face.