**Agenda Topic:** Enhanced Basic Skills Test Passing Score

**Materials:** Recommended Passing Score and Projected Pass Rate

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**Purpose of Agenda Item**

To set the passing scores for the new enhanced Basic Skills test required for teacher certification.

**Expected Outcome(s) of Agenda Item**

The Board will adopt the total test and minimum allowable subarea scores for the enhanced Basic Skills test.

**Background Information**

The Board is committed to improving the system of teacher preparation, certification and continuing professional development with the goal of ensuring that all Illinois public school students have access to quality teachers. Implementation of a new system of teacher certification assessments plays a major role in this process. Consequently, for several months, the Board has discussed what knowledge and skills should be assessed via this new system of assessments and at what stages in a teacher’s preparation the various assessments should be required.

Central to the discussion has been the issue of basic skills. In addition to assessing candidates’ content and pedagogical knowledge, the Board firmly believes that all teacher candidates should demonstrate mastery of basic skills—either before entering the teacher education program or before receiving an initial certificate. As a result, in February, 2000, the Board directed staff to develop and have ready by fall 2001, an enhanced basic skills test that would be more rigorous than the test that was currently being used.

Working with the current test contractor, National Evaluation Systems, staff began the multi-step test development process by convening a Basic Skills Advisory Group comprised of representatives from the Board of Higher Education, the Community College Board, public school teachers, teachers’ unions, higher education institutions,
The Basic Skills Advisory Group provided advice on the standards that should be assessed and the types of items that should be included in the test. A result of the work of the advisory group was a draft set of standards that would be assessed via the new test and which was aligned with the Illinois Transferable General Education Core Curriculum, the Illinois Learner Standards and the appropriate teacher standards. This proposed set of test standards was then reviewed by the Illinois Certification Testing System’s Bias Review Committee and the Basic Skills Content Advisory Committee comprised of reading, language arts and mathematics experts from Illinois public schools, community colleges, and teacher preparation programs.

After being approved by these two committees, the standards were formatted into a content validation survey and sent to samples of public school personnel and college faculty who were asked to validate the standards by ranking their importance. Once the standards were validated, test items to assess the standards were drafted. All test items were reviewed, and revised as appropriate, by the Bias Review Committee and the Basic Skills Content Advisory Committee. Field testing of the items followed. Multiple-choice test items were field tested on operational forms of the former basic skills test; while constructed response items were field tested at teacher preparation institutions.

The first administration of the enhanced basic skills test was conducted on September 15, 2001. Following the administration and the scoring of the tests, the Basic Skills Advisory Group, the Basic Skills Content Advisory Committee and the Bias Review Committee were convened for a Passing Score Review Meeting. The passing score recommendations resulting from that meeting were presented to and discussed by the State Teacher Certification Board at its November 2, 2001. A summary of that review process and the State Teacher Certification Board’s recommended passing scores are included in the attached document, “Pass Rates Associated with Recommended Passing Scores”.

Dr. John Silvestro, Senior Area Director for National Evaluation Systems, and staff will be present at the meeting to discuss the recommended passing scores.

**Analysis and Implications for Policy, Budget, Legislative Action and Communications**

The rigor of any assessment can be controlled through three factors: (1) the content that is assessed via the instrument; (2) the type and difficulty of the items used to assess that content; and, (3) the passing score. Two of these factors were addressed during the development of the enhanced basic skills test—both the content and the items used to assess that content are more rigorous than on the previous basic skills test.
For example, on the new test, the assessment of reading comprehension skills places emphasis on applying inferential, analytical and critical reasoning skills. Test items based on passages from college level texts are used to assess these skills. Similarly, the assessment of writing requires an examinee to write a composition in response to a college-level academic assignment that asks the examinee to analyze and discuss a contemporary social, political, legal or economic issue. The assessment of mathematics addresses algebra, geometry, statistics, and the ability to solve problems; and, requires the examinee to use a combination of mathematical skills in multiple-step processes. Evidence of the increased difficulty of the content and test items is found by reviewing item statistics such as p-values from the September 15th test administration. (The p-value is an indicator of the difficulty of an item as it relates to the percentage of all examinees who answered the item correctly.)

The third factor controlling the rigor of the assessment, the passing score, will be determined by the Board. The first time pass rates for the previous basic skills test approximated 91%. An expected outcome of increasing the rigor of the content and item types on the new test is a lower pass rate. The Board will determine how low the pass rates will be when it establishes the total test passing score and the minimum allowable subarea scores.

**Pros and Cons of Various Actions**

In establishing the passing score, the Board is confronted with balancing their quest for high standards and nurturing an ample supply of new teachers to meet the increasing demand.

Additionally, where the passing score is set will have a considerable effect on the pass rates for minority group members. Disparate pass rates for examinees who are members of minority groups are disturbing, but unfortunately, not surprising. On the previous basic skills test, the first time pass rates for minority group members were generally 20 percentage points lower than for non-minority group examinees. The Bias Review Committee, originally convened in 1986 to ensure that the disparate pass rates were not the result of bias in the assessment instrument, continues to work with us today for that same purpose. As noted above, the Bias Review Committee played an integral role in the development of the enhanced basic skills test. The committee reviewed all test standards and all test items for the purpose of ensuring that (1) the test was free of bias; and, (2) the test materials reflect Illinois’ diverse population.

Specifically, committee members reviewed the standards and test items for content or language that could disadvantage a person because of her or his gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, age, disability, or cultural, economic or geographic background. Committee members also considered whether the test materials contained any element that might be considered offensive or included stereotypes based upon the above characteristics. Finally, they were asked whether, taken as a whole, the test materials are fair to all individuals regardless of race, gender, cultural background or other personal characteristic. If committee members found any materials to be
questionable, the standard or test item was revised appropriately or, if necessary, eliminated.

Despite these efforts, minority pass rates continue to be considerably lower than majority group members. Regrettably, these performance differences are not unlike the results seen in student assessments. Similar disparities are found in the percentages of minority and majority students meeting and exceeding state standards as measured by both the eighth grade Illinois Student Achievement Test (ISAT) and the Prairie State Achievement Exam (PSAE).

The establishment of the cut score must also consider that passing the test requires the examinee not only to score at or above the total test passing score, but also to achieve at least the minimum allowable score in each of four subareas of reading, language arts, mathematics and writing. Consequently, the pass rates for all examinees will be effected by (1) where the total test passing score is set; and, (2) what the minimum allowable subarea scores are.

Mathematics is the subarea that is particularly problematic for many examinees. The p-values for the mathematics test items reveal that performance in mathematics is significantly lower than for items assessing reading and language arts. Several reasons can be suggested for these differences. While it is true that the enhanced basic skills test mathematics standards are aligned with the mathematics standards for our K-12 students, it is important to remember that these standards were adopted just over four years ago when many of these teacher candidates were already in college. Therefore, it is quite likely many of these teacher candidates were either not required or did not have the opportunity to learn this material during their K-12 experience. Even for those teacher candidates who did take coursework covering this material, it is possible they did not retain the information because they do not use it on a daily basis. Unlike the skills of reading and writing which college students use on a daily basis, they are not often called upon to solve algebraic equations or geometric problems. Further, it is likely these teacher candidates were not required to take any mathematics higher than general mathematics in their college program—either at the community college level or the four-year institution.

**Superintendent’s Recommendation**

Accept the State Teacher Certification Board’s recommendation regarding the total test passing score and the minimum allowable subarea scores and within two years increase the minimum subarea score for math to 50%.

**Next Steps**

Upon establishment of the passing scores, score reports will be prepared and sent to examinees who took the basic skills test on September 15, 2001.
As recommended by the State Teacher Certification Board, the State Board should annually review the total test passing score and minimum allowable scores for the subareas with the intent to raise the scores.