Concessive *At least*

Introduction. The superlative *at least* has a "concessive" (CON) reading (1).

(1) Mary didn't win the gold medal, but at least she won the $[\text{SILVER}]_F$ medal.
'Wining a silver medal is not the best outcome (i.e. wining gold), but it is satisfactory'

According to Nakanishi & Rullmann 2009, CON involves (i) a preference scale $>_{CON}$ such that $p >_{CON} q$ iff p is preferred over q, (ii) a "conventional implicature" (CI) imposing the existence of two propositions r and r' such that $r >_{CON} p >_{CON} r'$, where p is the "target proposition" (TP) (i.e., the proposition under the scope of *at least*) and (iii) the assertion that the TP is true. This explains why (2a) is felicitous, but (2b) isn't (there's no proposition below TP).

(2) a. Mary didn't win the gold medal, but at least she won the $[\text{SILVER}]_F$ medal.
b. There were 8 competitors. #Mary didn't win the gold medal, but at least she got the 8th place.

Problems. Just having a lower ranked proposition in a preference scale isn't sufficient: even though there are lower ranked alternatives (e.g., answering only one question), (3) is still infelicitous.

(3) Any student who answered less than 5 answers will, in my opinion, be a complete failure. # John didn't pass the exam, but at least he answered 2 questions.

A sentence with CON cannot directly answer a question (4a): it has to be established in the prior discourse that John didn't achieve the "optimal" outcome (4b). Besides, CON cannot appear in *both* the answer and the question (4b.A).

(4) a. A: Did John get a medal?/ What medal did John get?
B: # At least he won the $[\text{SILVER}]_F$ medal.
b. A: I know John didn't get a gold medal, but did he (??at least) get SOME medal?
B: (Well,) At least he won the $[\text{SILVER}]_F$ medal.

The analysis. Let us assume the alternatives to TP are generated by the focus value $[\![.]\!]^f$ (Rooth 1992) (10a). Second, let us modify the preference relation by relativizing it to a *judge j* (Lasersohn 2005) – i.e., both the place where TP ends up in the scale and how the scale is partitioned in terms of optimal and non-optimal alternatives are relativized to *j*. I propose (10b-d), where *min* and *max* are operators that take the minimally acceptable and optimal alternatives, respectively, according to *j*.

(10) a. $[\![\text{M. won the } [\text{SILVER}]_F \text{ medal}]\!]^f$ = {M. won the gold medal, M. won the silver medal, etc.}
b. $[\![\text{at least}_{CON}\ \alpha]\!] = \lambda w.\ [\![\alpha]\!](w)$
c. <u>Presupposition</u>: $max([\![\alpha]\!]^f) >_{CON,\,j} [\![\alpha]\!]$
d. <u>CI</u>: $[\![\alpha]\!] >_{CON,\,j} min([\![\alpha]\!]^f)$

Now, we can account for (2)-(4): (2b) and (3) are infelicitous because the TP is *not* above $min([\![\alpha]\!]^f)$ according to j = speaker; (4b) is fine because the presupposition (10b) is *accommodated* (Lewis 1979); and the degraded status of (4b) with CON in (4b.A) reflects the fact that CIs cannot be *backgrounded*, i.e., established in the prior discourse (Potts 2005).

References: Lasersohn, P. (2005). Context Dependence, Disagreement, and Predicates of Personal Taste. *L&P*, 28(6). ♦ Lewis, D. (1979). Scorekeeping in a Language Game. *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8. ♦ Nakanishi, K. & Rullmann, H. (2009). Epistemic And Concessive Interpretations Of *At Least*. CLA Meeting, Carleton University. ♦ Potts, C. (2005). *The Logic of Conventional Implicatures*. OUP. ♦ Rooth, M. (1992). A theory of focus interpretation. *Natural Language Semantics*, 1(1).