

## WRITING ASSESSMENT IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Speakers: Edward Deluzain, *Bay County Schools, Florida*  
Charles Chew, *New York Department of Education*

Introducer/Recorder: Gwen Sheffield, *Colquitt County Schools, Georgia*

Although many speakers at the conference focused their attention on assessing college writing programs, this session featured two authorities on the assessment of high school writing programs, Charles Chew from the state department level and Edward Deluzain from the local school level. Both view writing assessment as a means of improving students' writing.

Charles Chew, Chief of the Bureau of English Education for the New York State Department of Education, has directed that state's mandated writing assessment program from its inception five years ago. Chew affirmed that the students in New York are writing better than before the assessment program began. His research shows that students are writing more, teachers are better prepared, and English curricula have been revised to utilize research on the writing process.

Recognizing that each state department head must work out a program that fits its resources and needs, Chew shared the basic features of the program he directs. Every student in grades 5, 8 or 9, and 11 must take a competency exam. Writing skills assessment is based on three writing samples set in the rhetorical frameworks of a business letter, a report from given data, and a persuasive essay.

After the students have taken the writing assessment test, their responses are holistically analyzed by at least three different raters. Papers which score 60% and above are sent to Chew's office, where Department raters validate the scores given at the local level. Raters, hired by the Department on a per diem basis, must have a college degree with a major or minor in English, some actual teaching experience, and a satisfactory performance on a test to determine their reliability, their ability to use the complete range of the evaluation scales, and their ability to rank-order papers consistently. When Chew's raters reverse the local decision, they must subject the papers to at least six holistic readings. Even then the students can appeal the decision and have the papers regraded.

Especially crucial is the 11th grade writing assessment test, for students cannot graduate without demonstrating minimum competency. Students failing the state-wide January exam retest in June and again in August of their junior year—then again in January and June of their senior year. In addition, there is a procedure known as the 24-hour turn-around, which permits seniors to retest shortly before they are scheduled to graduate. Such measures assure students that they are individuals who matter to the Department.

Another important feature of New York's assessment program is the mandated instruction for all students whose writing is judged incompetent. The instruction must be documented; letters must be sent home to parents; students must be informed. Every effort is then made to remediate students in

individualized programs.

Even though other state leaders may not choose to set up their assessment programs this way, Chew nevertheless urged all policy makers to give special priority to what he considers the four essentials for a good assessment program: (1) developing the items for the writing sample; (2) developing and training raters; (3) implementing a consistent state-required writing program; and (4) using the testing program to improve the instructional program.

Edward Deluzain is at the opposite end of the spectrum from Dr. Chew. He is a teacher and chair of the English department at Moseley High School in Panama City, Florida, a school with about 1500 students in grades 10-12. With the goal of improving the school's instructional program, Deluzain initiated a local writing assessment program in 1982, developed a follow-up assessment for 1983, and will continue in-house assessment as long as such tests bring results in the classrooms of Moseley High School.

Deluzain analyzed the 1982 test results and found both summative and formative uses for these results. In particular, his finding that seniors' writing was measurably superior to that of the juniors, and that the juniors' writing was measurably superior to sophomores, was a definite morale booster for students and teachers alike.

The teachers were surprised to find that the performance of the accelerated junior and senior classes was lower than that of the accelerated sophomores. However, all accelerated classes wrote better than the basic and average classes for all grades. Immediately, Deluzain and his colleagues began to strengthen the accelerated program, making it more specific and demanding. By the time the 1983 assessment took place, measurable improvement had been made in the performance of the accelerated students' writing as compared to the performance of the basic and average students.

The selected date for assessing writing allowed Dr. Deluzain to compare the relative standing of students who had been enrolled in direct writing classes the first semester with those who had been enrolled in literature classes the first semester. Contrary to his expectations, 67% of the samples from the literature classes were better than the samples from the writing courses in 1982. (Both groups had been required to produce one piece of writing per week all semester.) Again the faculty worked together to find ways to improve the instruction. They added more pre-writing and idea-building discussions to the writing courses based on literary works, so that by 1983 only 37% of the literature classes' samples were better. The faculty at Moseley High School are determined to continue to revise the curriculum in terms of weakness and strengths indicated by the writing assessment tests.

Deluzain concluded the "Teachers have a right to know when good teaching is succeeding, students have a right to know when hard work is paying off, and parents and the general public have a right to know when tax dollars are being well spent. Writing assessment programs tied to responsive curriculum improvement can be the means to giving this reassurance."

Chew added that inevitably teachers will direct their instruction toward the format of the writing assessment test. However, if they get involved in preparing, rating, analyzing, and evaluating the curriculum in terms of the assessment test, as have Deluzain and the other teachers at Moseley High School, teaching toward the test can be the best means to improving students' writing.