

A COMPETENCY TEST IN WRITING: AN IMPETUS FOR CHANGE

New York State has a mandated Regents competency program in three basic skills areas: reading, writing, and mathematics. Students must meet competency requirements in these areas in order to receive a high school diploma. The focus of the material which follows will be on the writing test part of the competency program.

A Preliminary Competency Test in Writing (PCT) is administered to students in grades 8 or 9, depending upon the administrative set-up of the school district. This test is a direct measure of students' writing ability and requires students to write three specific types of writing: a business letter of order, a report from given data, and a persuasive essay. The PCT's are evaluated holistically at each school by three teachers. The ratings are then averaged. Students scoring below the statewide standard of 65 must receive remedial instruction, directions for which are detailed in the publication, *New York State Preliminary Competency Test in Writing: Manual for Administrators and Teachers*.

Students scoring between 50 and 64% on the PCT's receive individual *additional* instruction in writing as part of the regular English curriculum. These instructional strategies include:

- using students' own writing as a basis for instruction rather than assigning mass drill in unrelated material;
- grouping students within the regular English classroom according to their compositional needs;
- using individual instruction and differentiated assignments;
- using such exercises as sentence combining to develop syntactic fluency;
- using interviewing techniques with students;
- encouraging peer teaching;
- providing practice in editing and revising.

Students scoring 49% or below on the PCT's receive *intensive* instruction in writing. Such students seem to benefit most from a tutorial approach during all stages of the composing process. Special attention is given to the prewriting stage of the composing process in order for students to gain verbal power, to learn to observe and describe, and to develop a positive attitude toward themselves and their work. Remediation must be documented and continued until the student has proved to the satisfaction of the school district that weaknesses have been overcome—or the student passes the Regents Competency Test in Writing (RCT).

The RCT in Writing is first administered in January of the eleventh year. This test consists of three writing tasks—a business letter of complaint, a report from given data, and a persuasive essay. A different version of this test is offered three times a year. Students who do not meet the statewide reference point of 65 or above must also receive remedial instruction. Remedial help at this stage should, of course, include all of the aspects detailed above, but may also need to be more test specific at this point. Students may continue to take the test, if failed, until they are 21.

The Regents Competency Test in Writing has had a direct and powerful influence on classroom instruction, curriculum development, and in-service programs for teachers, and on the approximately 200,000 high school

(Continued on page 14)

CHEW (continued)

students who take the test each year. Several factors may account for this:

- students must meet the competency requirements in order to graduate;
- high schools, in order to be registered by the Education Department, must meet a number of criteria, one of which is that 85% of the graduating students must have met competency requirements;
- the Education Department reviews every test paper which receives a grade of 60% or above (approximately 170,000 papers) in order to confirm the grade given at the local level. It is the Education Department which certifies whether or not a student has met the competency requirement in writing. Raters are hired by the Department on a per diem basis but must meet a number of prerequisites before being hired, including: a college degree with a major or minor in English; teaching experience; satisfactory performance on a six hour test used to determine reliability as a rater, ability to use the complete range of the evaluation scale, ability to rank-order papers consistently over time; and availability for work.

The State's overall testing program identifies students whose writing ability is weak as early as grade 8, and instructional help must be provided to overcome weaknesses. Beginning in May of 1983, a writing test will be administered to all fifth grade students, and remediation will be mandated at that level for all students who have problems in writing. Guidelines for elementary school remediation in writing are being developed and certainly will mandate instruction in all aspects of the writing process. These will be included in the manual which accompanies the test and will be available to schools throughout the State.

The writing test has caused a flurry of activity related to writing programs in the schools. Even the most "die-hard" critics of the statewide competency program must admit that the English teacher has more clout now than has been true in the recent past. Given the concerns of educational institutions, business organizations, college admissions offices, parents, and the community at large, the focus on writing is long overdue.

The test—and the materials which accompany it—focus on the process of writing. Many schools have responded by adopting the NCTE statement on writing programs in developing their classroom instruction. With the development of new programs and the revamping of existing ones, and with the advent of a writing assessment at the elementary school level, a new concern with and a clearer direction for an articulated K-12 program in writing have emerged. In addition, administrators and teachers have recognized the need for professional in-service training for writing instruction—a need for better teacher preparation now also recognized nationally. In-service programs now abound in our state.

The test has created the impetus for curriculum review both at the local and state level. Work began nearly a year ago at the state level to revise the English/Language Arts curriculum. A draft of the writing portion of this curriculum was completed during the summer of 1982, but work on this project will continue for the next two years. Plans call for a K-12 writing curriculum, a supervisor's manual, and a publication for writing instruction in disciplines other than English.

Readers may be interested in my perceptions gained from the Competency Test in Writing. The following is only a sampling:

- A statewide testing program can be put in place and can create a positive instructional thrust within the schools.

- Much more needs to be learned about the writing process and the product students produce in a testing situation.
- More information is needed about handicapped students (hearing and visually impaired, learning disabled) and the writing competency requirements.
- Schools must develop a K-12 writing program which includes all disciplines.
- Development of the student as writer needs to begin early in the student's school experience.
- Schools must establish ways to monitor students' progress in writing on a K-12 basis.
- Teachers can be trained to evaluate papers using a particular procedure, and they can become reliable at using it.
- A system can be established to review massive numbers of written compositions.
- Tests, to some degree, can narrow the perception of what a writing program is or can be.

Charles R. Chew is Chief of the Bureau of English Education for the New York State Education Department, Albany, New York; his responsibilities include development of competency tests in writing and the Comprehensive Examination in English (the Regents), supervision and assessment of English/Language Arts Programs K-12, and the development of a state curriculum.
