

THE IMPACT OF A FIFTH GRADE WRITING TEST

Speakers: John S. Mayher, *New York University*
Nancy Lester, *The Write Company, New York*

Introducer/Recorder: Thelma Worthen, *Alamo School District, California*

John Mayher began the session with a discussion of the background of New York's statewide writing test. Although New York State had been involved in the evaluation of writing since 1979, its program had been focused primarily on the secondary level. From the beginning, however, the need to develop an assessment instrument for the lower level was apparent. When teachers of young children became involved in developing the statewide testing program, they pressed for assessment at the lower levels. The result was the collection and evaluation of 10,000 papers from elementary level students, and then the development of *The Writing Test for New York State Elementary Schools*, which is now given to all fifth grade students in the state of New York. Pretest items in five categories (personal expression, personal narrative, process writing, description, and response to a "story starter") were tried out in February, 1982 in a representative sample from New York elementary schools.

In October, 1982, the State Department of Education began to train a group of fifty evaluators in holistic reading methods. They in turn trained fifth grade teachers throughout the state. Subsequently, papers from all fifth grade students in New York's public schools were evaluated in their own schools, the administering and evaluating conforming to standards that had been established statewide. Each student wrote two papers, each of which was evaluated independently by two readers, and each student's score was the sum of scores from the two papers.

Mayher noted that the purpose of this first testing was to establish a baseline or statewide reference for future testing. However, one of the most important uses of the test scores is the early identification of students in need of special instruction. Thus, students (who must ultimately pass the Regents Competency Test to graduate from the schools of New York State) and their teachers now have a means of developing early awareness of any special needs. As the program develops, a growing body of information and criteria are evolving to support the statewide effort to bring a large majority of students in the public schools to a level of achievement that qualifies them for graduation.

Nancy Lester described that test in detail. It is divided into two parts, each to be given on separate, preferably consecutive days. It consists of two writing tasks, one for each day, drawn from the established five categories mentioned previously. Teachers read the directions aloud to the students, who are given up to two hours to complete the test. There are several kinds of prompts included in the directions. The first presents the topic to be written on, the second provides questions to help the student generate information to be used in writing the paper,

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and the third provides concrete aids for the writer.

Examples of these prompts follow:

- I. Topic—You have asked a friend to take care of a pet because you are going away for the weekend.
Write a composition of about 150 words telling your friend about the pet and how to take care of it.
- II. Questions—
 1. What kind of pet can you write about?
 2. What are some things you want your friend to know about the pet?
 3. What are some things that your friend should do to take care of the pet?
 4. Think how you might end your composition.
- III. Concrete aids for the writer:
In preparing your composition, remember to:
 1. Write your first draft on scrap paper.
 2. Read carefully what you have written.
 3. Make any changes that will improve your first draft.
 4. Write your final copy on the answer paper given to you by your teacher. Use a pen to write your final copy.
 5. Draw a line through any mistake you may make when you are writing your final copy. Make the correction and continue on with your final copy. You do not need to begin a new final copy.
 6. Read your final copy before you hand it in to make sure you have not made any copying mistakes.

Mayher's and Lester's concluding comments focused on the impact of the test. The adoption of a statewide test, with the holistic mode of evaluation, has resulted in many benefits:

1. Statewide attention to the writing of elementary children by their teachers and administrators.
2. Reinforcement of the ideas that students must write early and regularly and that attention must be given to their development of a methodical approach to writing.
3. Introduction of in-service training in a number of elementary schools.
4. A new awareness on the part of teachers of the benefits of a coordinated attack within a school on the problem of improving student writing.