FINDING BALANCE:

TEACHING WRITING IN THE AGE OF ASSESSMENT

By

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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In an age of assessment and standardized testing, assessing student writing in a way that meets state expectations while also eliciting student growth is a daily challenge for English teachers. Because of the need for equity and accountability in education amongst high schools, the State of New Jersey adapted standardized testing and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) to ensure our students are meeting certain goals. Finding a balance between reaching the standards, while also evaluating student growth and development in writing is a major frustration for teachers. To understand ways to manage this alignment, I completed an ethnographic study at Highland Regional High School, in Blackwood, NJ. I conducted my research in a public high school where I interviewed teachers and administrators, and analyzed lesson plans, grading rubrics, and district writing assessments. Using this information in conjunction with the CCSS and the PARCC examination, I studied how teachers are addressing the state standards for writing while also trying to measure and evaluate student growth in a less objective way. Finding an appropriate balance for this is the ultimate problem.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Balancing Student Writing Assessment with State Demands

To be an English teacher in a New Jersey public high school means being a master of balance. Teachers must follow two curricula: the one inspired by their passion for reading and writing, and the one proposed by the school district and the state. An English teacher's love of Language Arts motivates many lessons and inspires student growth. Finding the time for this is difficult because they must abide by the school's curriculum and the state of New Jersey. In order for students to advance to the next grade level of English and graduate high school, they must complete and pass a series of writing assessments throughout the school year. With the standards set forth by the state, teachers are limited in their ability to freely assess writing and instead must ensure that specific criteria are being met. Six months out of the school year are spent preparing and teaching lessons that enrich students and guide them to succeed with a language arts education. The other three months are spent prepping for state tests like the retired High School Proficiency Assessment[1] (HSPA) and the newly instated Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers[2] (PARCC). Nevertheless, students spend one hundred and eighty school days learning how to read and write while the teachers are ensuring that the ways students are learning are delineated in the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards[3] (CCSS). Though most teachers celebrate structure, routine, and fairness, there is definitive tension between how they may want to assess their students and how the state wants them to. More specifically, the conflict arises with the assessment of student writing.

Teachers often wonder if their students are growing and learning from writing assessments. Are the methods in which teachers are instructing and assessing effective and appropriate? Educators want their students to grow as writers. Showing a progression from the beginning stages to the final stages of writing illustrates a student's ability to grow. Understanding weaknesses in writing, such as a lack of idea development or a struggle with sentence structure, and working to change and improve those difficulties, shows growth. Growth is shown if a student is learning from mistakes and expanding upon successes. Finding the best way to assess that growth is a constant challenge.

Success in writing has a different definition for each student. If teachers are the experts of their students' ability in the classroom, then the teacher's assessment should be the best method. During the Bush administration, the No Child Left Behind[4] (NCLB) law was created as a way to universalize reading, writing, and mathematics. This law attempted to create equality by creating tests and standards that all students must meet in order to advance to other grades and graduate high school. Each state provides guidelines and expectations that teachers must meet in their instruction and help students to meet in their ability. Instead of teachers assigning writing and assessing writing how they find most appropriate for their students, and facilitating their growth in the process, they are required to follow the structure the state has created. The question is two-fold: is success in student writing defined by the standards? Should the specified criteria delineated by the state be the overarching determiner of success? Teachers struggle with this notion of a higher order making decisions about the writing success of their students. However, teachers' voices are often left unheard because of the demands of the state.

Though teachers know the best methods to help guide their students to grow in their writing, testing and assessments often hinder these methods. They are the experts of their students' writing ability in the classroom and often wish they had more autonomy in how they assess their students' work.

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Teachers are fueled by the passion to teach and to help their students grow and learn to be well rounded, educated adults. Unfortunately, the fuel that now ignites this fire are the Common Core State Standards and standardized testing such as the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career. The Common Core State Standards were designed to increase the level of expectation and provide students equal opportunity in education throughout the state. Developed in 2009, "State school chiefs and governors recognized the value of consistent, real-world learning goals and launched this effort to ensure all students, regardless of where they live, are graduating high school prepared for college, career, and life" (Core Standards). Though this may sound like a positive endeavor, understanding the different learning needs, skill levels, and growth for students offers a more realistic perspective of how students should be taught in the classroom.

As outlined on the CCSS website, the CCSS work to provide the "skills and knowledge students will need to succeed in college, career, and life." Unfortunately, the CCSS ignores critical issues of growth in student learning. The CCSS are specific to content (Mathematics and English Language Arts) and grade level (sixth through twelfth grade). For this study on the assessment of student writing, I focused on the English Language Arts Standards for writing from grades nine through twelve (ninth and tenth

grade are categorized together and eleventh and twelfth are the same). The writing standards ask students to include the use of evidence from text to support the analysis and claims of the writer. In addition, the standards also require students to be able to inform and persuade through writing. According to the standards, there are three modes of writing for the secondary level (grades 6-12):

1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

Within the writing standards, there is exceptional attention to literary non-fiction. The website explains:

"Though the standards still expect narrative writing throughout the grades, they also expect a command of sequence and detail that are essential for effective argumentative and informative writing. The standards' focus on evidence-based writing along with the ability to inform and persuade is a significant shift from current practice."

Informational writing will indeed help students with writing outside of high school; however, it continues to restrict what kind of writing can be taught in the classroom and what kind of freedom teachers can have to teach and students can have to experiment with different genres. Instead, educators have to ensure that these standards are being addressed.

Though the state of New Jersey has said goodbye to the HSPA exam, they are saying hello to the PARCC exam during the 2014-2015 school year. The PARCC test is a way to universalize assessments and "measure whether students are on track to be successful in college and their careers" (*PARCC*). According to the PARCC website,

"PARCC is based on the core belief that assessment should work as a tool for enhancing teaching and learning. Because the assessments are aligned with the new, more rigorous Common Core State Standards, they ensure that every child is on a path to college and career readiness by measuring what students should know at each grade level."

The controversy about this test began before the test was even administered in New Jersey public high schools. Educators and parents expressed concern about how the test does not measure a student's growth and ability. They have also expressed trepidations about the level of difficulty for students and the anxiety it will likely produce. The Associated Press issued an article stating that, "The New Jersey Assembly has voted in favor of a measure that would bar educators from using new standardized tests to determine student placement for three years." Luckily, this provides the state more time to address concerns with the test.

Nevertheless, there is still great pressure coming from parents and educators about students taking such a rigorous test that could result in students feeling inadequate and incapable. In a letter to the superintendent of Millburn High School, a mom describes her frustrations with the school not supporting parents' decisions for their children to "opt-out" of the testing (Strauss). The parent discusses her anger with the conflation of assessment and high stakes standardized testing, the pressure the test will put on students, and the overall disregard for teachers leading their instruction based off of student strengths, weaknesses, and interest and not for success on a difficult and lengthy test (Strauss). These frustrations highlight the issues with the CCSS and the PARCC examination.

Guiding students to learn and grow as literate adults is the true goal of educators; it's the real reason many people decide to become teachers. When the hammer is down,

teachers have to ensure that their students are meeting the standards laid down by the state. It is crucial to measure individual student growth in alignment with the state standards, but some of the criterion, especially those outlined in assessments and rubrics, challenge this possibility. This is a major problem with English instruction in New Jersey public high schools.

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This research study addresses the following question: Can teachers balance the requirements of state standards for student writing and also be effective in assessing their students' ability to grow? Though the intentions of the state standards and PARCC testing are to universalize education and offer students equal opportunity for success, it is unfair for student writing to require the same level of expectation. Student writing is abstract and individualized. Preparing for standardized tests and following the standards does not allow teachers to properly assess student growth based on each student's level of skill. In this study, I argue that a great deal of work needs to be done before the standards are well integrated into a classroom. In addition, I argue that there are a variety of ways to assess student writing and that the restrictions placed on teachers by the state hinder a student's opportunity to flourish in his/her writing. In this study, I prove that there are effective and non-effective ways to assess student writing and that by finding one way to create fairness in grading is impossible as it will only provide a disservice to students and their individual writing needs. To address this problem of how to appropriately assess student writing, my study turns close to home. Highland Regional High School, in Blackwood, NJ became the testing place for this study. Highland is one of three high schools in the Black Horse Pike Regional School District.

In this project, I will first reveal what writing assessment experts say about appropriately evaluating student writing. This information is delineated through a solid background section on writing assessment. The next section of this project shows the collection of information about writing assessment at Highland High School such as first-hand accounts of teacher experiences with assessing student writing and addressing the standards in the classroom through interview questions and analysis of lesson plans, assignments, and grading tools. By using this information, I will ultimately reveal the frustrations for educators with assessing student writing in a New Jersey public high school. I will also expose the inability for the standards and the PARCC test to properly measure student growth and to accommodate each student's individual writing needs.

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For this project, I use *writing assessment* as an umbrella term that covers a variety of pieces involved with teaching writing to high school students. The most important piece in writing assessment is the process. The topic students write about and their experience with developing ideas, conferencing, writing and revising is all part of the overall assessment of their ability. The final product, which is graded and evaluated, provides a description of their strengths and weaknesses after experience with the writing process. A summative assessment describes how teachers evaluate a final writing product, but it also describes degrees of success in developmental terms during the writing process. To determine if students are not only meeting the CCSS, but also showing growth within their writing, then both the writing process and product need to be taken into consideration.

This study establishes a conversation between scholarship on writing assessment and teacher practices in a high school public classroom. I looked for the best methods of evaluating student writing and how those evaluations can improve teacher instruction, and in turn, student growth in writing. After, I looked at the writing assessments for English classes at Highland and the methods for assessing those writing projects. I compared the rigor and expectations of the tests to the state standards, and the PARCC examination. In addition, I looked for similarities in how Highland assesses student writing to what other scholars have researched and discovered. To do this, I interviewed teachers and administrators to get a first-hand account of their classroom experience. With these interviews, I focused on how teachers are assigning writing assignments that both tend to the standards, but also reach the students. After students completed these assignments, I asked the educators how they assess the writing. The assignment and the evaluation bring the assessment of student writing full circle. I wanted to understand the teachers' feelings about how their students are improving their writing and what frustrations come conjointly. Evaluating student writing is one thing, but facilitating their growth as writers, is another. The problem is finding an appropriate balance when the expectations from the state are incredibly demanding.

This study is a snapshot of what it's like to teach and assess student writing in a New Jersey public high school. The tension between a teacher's vision on the assessment of student writing and the expectations of the state are alive in a high school classroom. However, the struggles with teaching to and meeting the Common Core State Standards are not isolated to Highland Regional. This high school is an example of most public high schools in the state, all of which are held to the same standards. A teacher's

freedom in assessing student writing is clouded by the requirements of state standards

and testing. This continues the frustration of teachers.

Chapter 1

Background on Assessment

Studying scholarly research on the assessment of student writing helps to develop

context and establish significance for this project. Analyzing how recent assessment

research is in dialogue with the practices of schoolteachers is crucial for addressing how

teachers respond to the state standards while also assessing students' growth in writing.

This chapter offers a brief overview of the history, present state, and anticipated results of

the outcomes of assessing student writing. The first part of this chapter addresses the

purpose and implications for assessing student writing according to writing research

scholars. This speaks to why educators assess and evaluate student writing. The next

section discusses how educators assess student writing and examines the best ways to do

so while also promoting student growth. The final section discusses the anticipated

benefits of providing feedback for student writing at the conclusion of an assessment.

This analysis and review of writing assessment background helps establish an exigency

for this research project that addresses the concerns of the assessment of student writing

in a public high school.

Part 1: Why do teachers assess student writing?

To close an "achievement gap," George W. Bush signed into law the "No Child

Left Behind" (NCLB) act in 2002. This act "requires students in public schools to meet

clear-cut academic proficiency goals within specific timeframes and enforces corrective

actions on public schools whose students do not meet the goals" (Ginsburg and Jamie).

Public schools must have regular assessments and standards to meet in order for students

to be "proficient." The struggle for public schools, especially those who "could not meet

the economic and educational demands," is to meet the "100% proficiency" the act requires. This level of proficiency is determined by each individual state. The NCLB act requires that schools within the same state must administer the same assessment so that results can be compared. However, each state can develop their own test while also deciding on their own level of proficiency. In addition, each state must have specific standards, which the NCLB act defines as "statement(s) of expectation of what every public school student should know by a specific grade level (Ginsburg and Jamie)." Each school chooses which assessment tests to administer (Ginsburg and Jamie).

After the establishment of the NCLB Act, educators were forced to have a very specific goal to help their students achieve: success on standardized tests. Assessing student writing became the way for teachers to measure their students' skill level and identify where instruction needs improvement. However, before the pressure of standardized testing and meeting the Common Core State Standards, teachers assessed student writing as a way to teach their students how to be better writers. Much of the dialogue in recent scholarship on the assessment of student writing addresses the purpose, goals, and strategies for assessing student writing.

Gauging student growth in writing and evaluating the writer's failures and successes is a constant difficulty in an English classroom. The question David Slomp asks in "Challenges in Assessing the Development of Writing Ability: Theories, Constructs and Methods" is "how do we measure writing ability" (81)? Do we measure the product or the development (81)? Because writing expectations and tasks differ among courses, teachers must "expand the theory of transfer in the assessment of student writing" (84). However, "transfer has an important limitation: it minimizes the role of

intrapersonal factors (prior knowledge, self-efficacy, etc.) in the development of writing ability" (84). Slomp addresses Bronfenbrenner's (1999) bioecological theory of development. This theory provides four factors that influence development: process, person, context and time. Assessment professionals need to examine "how a student's writing ability is developing" but also the factors that "support or inhibit" that development (Slomp 86). Test anxiety comes into play when students are writing structured, timed essays. Also, as a writer's focus shifts and changes between different classes, grades, and contexts, writing assessments need to be more complex in order to adjust to the changes (87). By adapting to these changes, and working to develop assessments that address the dynamics of classroom writing, teachers can have a window to the "thinking, analysis, and choices" of their growing students (87). Slomp references the work of Wardle and Roozen who suggest a "complex assessment program" that blends interviews, observations, and surveys (89).

The assessment of student writing provides guidelines for teaching, and shows the skill level of students. Liana Heitin's article, "Formative Assessment Seen as Key in Common-Core Era" from *Education Week* discusses the importance of formative assessment in the classroom. Students need to learn how to be self-sufficient, independent workers. By providing formative assessments, teachers can gauge student learning, address weaknesses, and celebrate accomplishments throughout the process. In addition, formative assessments can demonstrate the use of the CCSS in the classroom, while also offering practice for larger exams, such as the PARCC. Heitin explains that formative assessment allows teachers to "collect[ing] data on what students know, or don't know, and change[ing] instruction accordingly" (Heitin 10). In addition, she

believes that the work should be put on the students, and not the teachers. Students

should do the "heavy lifting" in finding answers to questions and developing responses

(Heitin 10). This means putting the work on the students, giving them the opportunity to

figure out problems, and work out situations in their own writing instead of relying on the

teachers to do the work for them.

In order to grasp student learning and student progress, formative assessments of

writing are necessary in the classroom (especially when preparing high school students

for a standardized test that will determine if they graduate). In "Initiative in Ore. District

Aims to 'Capture Data' on Written Work" Anthony Rebora discusses a school in Oregon

that developed more writing assessments and rubrics to gauge student learning. Writing

prompts and formal exams were created to find weakness in student writing. Like Heitin,

Rebora acknowledges the importance of formative assessments in order to change teacher

instruction to meet the needs of the students. The more writing, the better.

Using multiple methods to assess student writing provides a better overview of a

student's progress. Elizabeth Wardle envisions assessment that "incorporates portfolio

creation, revision, and assessment over time" in her article, "Addressing the Complexity

of Writing Development: Toward an Ecological Model of Assessment" (107). Wardle

argues that following student writing through all grade levels in order to better

understand the writing process would likely improve assessment (108). Having pre and

post assessment benchmarking seems to be the proper way to measure student growth

(Wardle 107). By doing this, student progress can be followed and examined. With

multiple assessments, a teacher can observe areas where students are improving with

their writing, and areas that need more focus. Wardle argues that students grow as

writers over time and through different curricula. Though it is difficult to follow student growth over time, doing so would elicit more information as to how to better suit students' needs in the classroom. The "ecological model of literate development takes seriously the broad range of textual experiences that inform the growth of persons' writing abilities" (108). These textual experiences include in-school and out-of-school literary engagements that contribute to the development of writing such as e-mail, letters, essays, and reports. These "intersecting social worlds," between different contexts and courses help students grow as writers and require more "complex and integrated assessment practices" such as portfolios that follow students over time (111). Traditional assessments offer immediate and measurable results while "longitudinal and ethnographic studies of literate development take longer" (111). However, these kinds of assessments also provide more detailed results on student growth. Even comprehensive assessments only offer a "snap shot" of a student's skill at one point in time (113). The process of watching students grow and develop over time is a challenge. However, doing so would be beneficial in helping educators understand the relationship between writer and identity (113).

　　　　With such a weight on writing assessment, and a push towards the standards, it is interesting that there isn't an emphasis on the "how" in assessing. The research question introduced in the beginning of Betsy DellBovi's article, "Literacy Instruction: From Assignment to Assessment" is, "how can literacy professors provide effective training in evaluating writing to graduate education students?" Betsy DelleBovi discusses her research project with pre-service teachers who "have limited understanding of what constitutes effective written prose in their disciplines." These graduate students address

their concerns about writing assessment and express the lack of professional development for assessing student writing. DelleBovi used social constructivist theory for this action research project, which concerns the involvement and collaboration between students and professors. This project, used to reflect on an issue in education and writing assessment, included nine students in the Graduate Adolescence Teacher Education Program, specifically in DelleBovi's course Foundations of Literacy Instruction. They studied and researched holistic scoring, created their own rubric and learned how to provide written feedback in addition to the raw numerical score. The students discussed validity and the importance of providing clear assignments with specific criteria. After, they practiced scoring high school writing samples, discussed and modeled feedback practices, and discussed how students may respond to "written commentary" (278). Through this practice, the students discovered that "no writing is without error and no one teacher is responsible to address it all" (278). The results of this study showed that studying different methods of assessment is positive for new teachers. Ultimately, teachers will evaluate more effectively when they create the rubric (though under the CCSS, teachers do not always have the freedom to create their own rubrics). DelleBovi proves that student teachers need more instruction on the assessment of student writing so they can better serve their students' needs.

Part 2: How should teachers assess writing to promote student growth?

Being an expert writer cannot, and should not, be the goal for every student. The learning process, the experimentation, the risk-taking, the errors, and the successes should be the crucial parts in a student's journey with writing. If a positive difference is shown, if progress was made, then a student has grown as a writer. Whether or not they

meet certain criteria should not be the conclusion to their writing ability. Each student grows at his/her own pace with his/her own goals. The focus should be more on the individual and the progress that is necessary for that student to become a better writer.

In the 1960s, the Educational Testing Service developed holistic scoring as a way to strengthen the reliability of testing and scores. Analytical grading, which is considered the antiquated form of grading, involves teacher comments and corrections which can be unstructured and subjective. Identifying the positive and negative characteristics of both holistic and analytic scoring is valuable in finding what is most effective. In the article "Reliability of National Writing Project's Analytic Writing Continuum Assessment System," Hee Jin Bang analyzes both holistic and analytic scoring and discusses the National Writing Project's (NWP) Analytic Writing Continuum (AWC). The AWC "provides a general holistic score that indicates the overall quality of writing" using a six-criteria scale: 1. Content, 2. Structure, 3. Stance, 4. Sentence Fluency, 5. Diction (word choice), 6. Conventions (punctuation/grammar). Though holistic scoring provides an overall score, analytical scoring "involves multiple aspects." Holistic is less time-consuming and also more reliable because it identifies expectations for each criteria. However, having consistency among scorers is difficult since each reader focuses on different categories, and may also interpret expectations differently.

According to Bang, scoring analytically allows for more "comprehensive coverage." Bang notes how there are "positive correlations between essay length and perceived quality" and also positive correlations between how mechanics, length, and hand-writing influence how writing is rated. These elements of length and quality are taken into consideration more so with analytical grading since a teacher has the freedom

to comment where and when needed. Scoring an essay with analytical comments provides more detailed feedback for a student, while also providing a more complete and inclusive evaluation. Holistic scoring cannot reveal all of the information in a text. Bang explains how in large assessments holistic scoring is advantageous because of the quickness and ease. Bang explains, "Some would argue that an accurate, valid assessment of writing should only be evaluated as a whole" and "instructionally, analytic is better because it identifies areas of weakness and strength more specifically." The NWP believe that both scores, holistic and analytic, are necessary for a complete assessment.

The Educational Testing Service originally created "Uniform scoring" because there was a lack of reliability and uniformity amongst essay scorers (Huot 202). Using a rubric with specific criteria became a "major means of direct writing evaluation" (201). Researchers and educators continue to wonder if rubrics, as opposed to analytical scoring, are the best way to assess writing. Is this "uniform scoring" a reasonable way to assess all student writing? Each student has a different background, different ideas, and different strengths and weaknesses when it comes to writing. Educators need to decide the real purpose for assessing student writing. In *What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing*, Bob Broad asks: "What do teachers value in student writing?" In the first chapter, he states that rubrics' greatest weakness is "what they leave out" and most rubrics only evaluate brevity and clarity (2). Rubrics were created to make "assessment quick, simple, and agreeable" (4). Though this is helping for grading, it certainly hinders the learning experience for the students, and the autonomy of lessons for the teacher. Their writing becomes cornered into a box of expectations that may not be

fair to every student. Joe Moxley's article, "Big Data, Learning Analytics and Social

Assessment" explains how the scores on a rubric do not reflect capabilities.

For formative and summative assessments, rubrics are often used. Though rubrics

measure how students are doing in a variety of levels, the concern is related to the

"oversimplifying" of the evaluation process. Using rubrics as objective measures of

success is an issue for writing researchers. According to Maja Wilson, "rubrics meet the

demands of objectivity by distancing teachers from their own perceptions in order to

create agreement among readers." Instead of grading and evaluating analytically, a rubric

makes the evaluation much more objective. Rubrics provide a way to improve equality

amongst teacher instruction and student assessment (which is the goal of the standards).

However, a rubric can only offer so much insight. Some rubrics are limited with their

feedback. A struggling student may need more of a response than what the rubric

provides.

The First Year Composition program at the University of South Florida developed

"community rubrics" that teachers would use for grading, and students would use for peer

evaluation (Moxley). The original name, "generic rubric," offered negative connotations

and educators felt that they were "delivered down from some legislative or professional

body." The renamed "community rubrics" ensure similarity amongst all graders. As the

director of USF's writing program, Joe Moxley discovered the benefits of having a

community rubric as a way to change grading from a "subjective process, to an objective

one." By sharing a common assessment tool, instructors could reach an agreement with

one another on assignment criteria and grade student work in equivalent ways. Though it

doesn't solve some of the larger issues, this process is good for curriculum revisions because the aggregated scores can help determine cohorts of students who are struggling.

Another challenge with holistic scoring is the difficulty seen with educators agreeing on a specific grade for a writing assignment. O'Neil's article, "Reframing Reliability for Writing Assessment" focuses on interrater reliability-getting scorers of writing to agree at an acceptable degree. According to Cherry and Meyer, as quoted by O'Neil, reliability "refers to how consistently a test measures whatever it measures." O'Neil argues that less standardized forms of assessment pose issues for interrater reliability. Because the grading becomes so subjective, a "valid" score becomes opaque. According to O'Neil, it is crucial to reframe the reliability in writing evaluation in order to "work toward a unified field of writing assessment."

Grading student essays in an effective fashion is the basis of much scholarly research and study. In the article, "The Effect of Scoring Order on the Independence of Holistic and Analytic Scores" Paul LeMahieu and Nancy Singer define holistic scoring as a "single summary judgment of quality" that "articulates dimensions." They describe analytic scoring as involving "essential attributes and individual judgments." The National Writing Project (NWP) works to develop and design activities for effective instruction. The NWP conducted a large-scale writing assessment in the summer of 2005 where they trained selected teachers to grade with both holistic and analytic scoring in order to discover the best methods for assessing writing. Two hundred fifty seven middle and high school student papers were studied using the six plus one trait model, which includes ideas/content development, organization, voice, sentence fluency, word choice, and conventions. There were four procedures to be studied: essays graded first

holistically then analytically, analytically then holistically, then "purely" holistic, and "purely" analytic. The change in order of evaluation techniques was used to find the most effective method of assessment. Two scorers graded each paper with discrepancies adjudicated by a third reader. The final score was the average of two scores. LeMahieu and Singer explain that the research was done to "examine the conventional wisdom that holistic scoring is best done before analytical scoring in order to "maximize the holistic score's independence." Though the essays scored analytically first had significantly higher scores, the scores considered more valid were those that were graded first holistically. These results proved the validity of rubric grading, making the rubric more efficient then analytic grading.

Evaluating student writing with a rubric has its benefits as described by Amy Covill in her article, "College Students' Use of a Writing Rubric." A recommended method is to provide students with an instructional writing rubric before they begin writing. Arguing that the use of rubrics can boost motivation and performance, Covill explains that, "motivation relies on goal setting and self-evaluation." Rubrics provide a "needed scaffold for constructed meaning." Because the criterion of an assignment is delineated in a rubric, the amount of requirements that need to be remembered by students is reduced since those requirements are represented within the format where they will be assessed. This guideline allows students to focus more on the process of writing instead of having concerns about the requirements of the assignments. For example, in a study done with middle and high school students, those who had the rubric while working on the assignment scored significantly higher than the students who did not. According to Covill, providing rubrics eased the students' stress for the writing assignment and

allowed students to develop goals. Having accessible goals is a fundamental part in enhancing the process of writing for students and if a student can see these writing goals outlined in a grading rubric, then they have something to work towards.

Part 3: What are the perceived benefits of writing feedback?

Extensive scholarly research has been done to address the effectiveness of writing assessments and how they influence student and teacher performance. One practice to be considered is the feedback provided to students after a writing assessment. Depending upon the kind of feedback received, students can either flourish with constructive criticism, or feel defeated by failure. If the goal of teachers is to help students learn from their mistakes and meet the state standards, then identifying the best ways to provide feedback, whether that is holistic or analytic, is a useful classroom tool.

Figuring out what leads to success and failure in student writing is a daunting task. Asao B. Inoue's article, "Theorizing Failure in US Writing Assessments," outlines the theories of failures for student writing. Inoue's argument begins as a competitive one by addressing failure due to race and culture in predominately Caucasian dominated educational settings (330). Student failure in assessments is because of "social inequalities, not personal feelings" and by changing students' style of writing to reflect the "expected" format the ideas of the students are actually being altered (330). As Slomp suggests, intrinsic motivation is necessary for a student's success in writing. Because we have a structure to follow, standards to meet and a test to pass, student writing can lose its personality. Inoue outlines three theories of failure: cognitive, sociocultural, and macrostructural. These theories, along with the lack of intrinsic motivation, explain student failure the most (332). Because teachers need to judge

student writing, failure is constructed by the actual writing assessment itself (333). The severe focus on grades hinders student learning.

The grade and the feedback students receive after a writing assessment can be either a detriment to their progress (if the feedback is negative or overwhelming) or a motivating factor (if the student has the intrinsic motivation to improve and correct the issues). Helen Dixon and Eleanor Hawe's empirical study, "Building Students' Evaluative and Productive Expertise in the Writing Classroom" discusses teacher feedback and intrinsic motivation. Failure, which is something created or structured as something to expect from a writing assessment, can have a negative impact on a student's psyche. This is detrimental to a student's intrinsic motivation. Emphasizing "productive failure" as a way to ensure positive criticism and leave room and opportunity for improvement is an encouraging method for teachers to use (Inoue 346). Dixon and Hawe emphasize the importance of establishing clear goals and that "the most effective way to write is through evaluation and revision" (67). However, teachers should not be the primary source of feedback because students will begin to depend on them, instead of discovering their own autonomy. Instead of students finding solutions to issues on their own or with each other, students depend upon the teacher to identify the errors and suggest ways to fix them. Providing students the opportunity to correct their own mistakes will help them become independent thinkers.

For students to grow as writers, they need feedback. Dana Ferris' contribution to the scholarship includes her article, "Responding to Student Writing: Teachers' Philosophies and Practices" which examines the purposes, process, and effects of feedback. During her qualitative case study, feedback concerned with content and

language was only given on final graded essays (13). This feedback was personal, handwritten, and focused on "content first, form later" (16). Ferris believes in the importance of feedback for improvement. She explains how teachers should pay more attention to what students do after receiving feedback. Are they taking the criticism and working to make corrections? Are they trying to learn and grow from the feedback? Doing so is ultimately how they will grow.

Considering the flood of reasons to assess student writing, provide appropriate feedback, and develop the best methods to do so, the job of teaching writing is a challenge for any high school English teacher. Finding the best ways to balance what students need, and what the state needs, adds to this already difficult position. Scholars have delved into the world of writing assessment, studying the advantages and disadvantages of holistic and analytic scoring, and deciding on how teachers should adjust their practices, and how students will best grow from feedback. Glancing into a public high school classroom is the best way to see how teachers are helping students reach the standards and decide if those ways really influence growth in student writing.

Chapter 2

A Look at Highland

In the previous chapter, I examined assessment practices based on the studies of writing assessment scholars. In this next chapter, I outline my place of study, Highland Regional High School. First, I describe the educators whom I interviewed for this project and I discuss their roles at Highland. Next, I review Highland's assessment practices and goals through continued interviewing and examination of the school website. This chapter will establish the context for my study.

Part 1: Introduction to interviewees

To answer my research question (can teachers balance the requirements of state standards for student writing and also be effective in assessing their students' ability to grow?) I interviewed a group of teachers at Highland. The questions I asked concerned student assessment, how they assess, and how district assignments and assessments correlate with PARCC and the New Jersey State Standards (Appendix 1 and Appendix 2). I wanted to delve into the minds of professionals who work with education and the assessment of student writing on a daily basis in a public high school. First, I wanted to interview an experienced teacher, one that has invested a great deal of time and energy into her career at Highland High School. Bonnie Brady, a former Educator of the Year, has been teaching English for twenty-four years. Earning her Masters of English in May 2014, Mrs. Brady continues to improve and grow as a teacher of Language Arts by teaching composition courses at Rowan University. Secondly, I interviewed a less experienced teacher who entered the profession with new and fresh ideas being only a few years out of college. Rachel Ferrara, an untenured teacher of three years who teaches

sophomore students was excited to offer her insights about student writing assessment. I also interviewed an English certified special education teacher, Justin Pelletier. Mr. Pelletier has been teaching for eight years and is both an in-class support teacher and a resource room instructor.

In addition to discussing the questions on student assessment with English teachers at Highland Regional High School, to fully expand the cohort and cover all parts of the English Department, I also interviewed the District English Supervisor, the District English Coach, and Highland's Vice Principal in charge of supervising the English Department. Marcie Geyer, the District English Supervisor, was an English teacher for fifteen years before becoming supervisor at Highland. She has now held this position for five years. Tara Wood, hired in the spring of 2013 as the District English coach, was an English teacher for eight years. Earning her Master's in English at Rutgers, Camden, Miss Wood works on developing benchmark assessments, compiling lesson activities and ideas, and working one-on-one with teachers in all three schools. Christina Collazo is the newly hired Vice Principal at Highland who oversees the English department. Miss Collazo was an English teacher for nine years before becoming an administrator in the summer of 2014. Miss Collazo provides an official observation for all of the English teachers at Highland.

Part 2: Highland's assessment goals

To help establish exigency for this project it's important to understand the needs and goals of student writing assessment. By understanding the value in assessing student writing, one can better see the issues in trying to balance state expectations with student needs.

Providing students the opportunity to grow as writers is one reason why teachers assess student work. Their job is to scaffold instruction and guide students into becoming literate adults. However, teachers cannot help but wonder if they are appropriately and effectively doing their job; are they providing students with the tools the students need to succeed, and are they learning how to use those tools? If teachers are the models for student writers, the ones to guide them and open doors to creative and critical thinking, how are teachers deciding on the successful traits of a student's written product? Why do teachers evaluate student writing, and what determines if that evaluation is effective? When asked, "Why do we assess student writing?" Highland's English supervisor, Marcie Geyer, explains that "you can identify the strengths and weaknesses of the student, so that you can target those skills that might be needed in specific lessons, scaffold, and give students the support they need." Mrs. Geyer helps paint the big picture: teachers are the facilitators of student learning, and writing is crucial in becoming an educated citizen. It is necessary for the writing to be evaluated in order for students to grow. The challenge is to continue facilitating this growth despite the strict guidelines of the standards. Tara Wood, Highland's English coach, supports the supervisor's statement:

> "…writing is an integral skill of our curriculum, and it's a skill that they need to go on in the world. I think it's our responsibility to foster, to lead the way with writing instruction. I know Common Core is pushing us to have more of every content area, but we are still the experts. Assessment gives us a guideline, a baseline of where they are. We can use the assessment to see where they are on that continuum and we can also set expectations with writing and students can see where they fall with the expectations."

Assessment can certainly be used as a tool in classrooms to provide baseline information and to lead towards meeting the state standards. However, as Ms. Wood explains, teachers should still be the initiators of growth and progress in the classroom.

The results from an assessment become a driving force in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of our students' writing. As Heitin explains, a critical way to assess students is to collect information from formative assessments. Having and utilizing this information by adapting lesson plans to better suit student needs emphasizes the importance of pre and post benchmarking and formative assessments. It becomes the goal of the school district to understand if student writing is being evaluated effectively. Highland High School, one of three schools in the Black Horse Pike Regional School District, follows the mission statement delineated by the District for developing "critical thinking and problem solving skills through reading and writing."

"The Common Core State Standards and the New Jersey Core Content Curriculum Standards call for the development of global competence, which requires students to be able to solve multi-dimensional problems. Multiple research studies have provided ample evidence that writing develops higher order thinking skills and increased writing means improved student performance across all disciplines (Reeves). We will promote a culture of literacy and foster intellectual growth by including written components on assessments, encouraging independent reading, and personal writing reflections in all content areas. This will include writing across the curriculum."

As outlined in this statement, students climb the ladder of higher-order thinking through writing. Promoting a culture that will nurture student growth in writing and help students think critically and analytically is the goal of the school district. Reaching the standards set forth by the state is another district goal. The tension arises between assessing writing by motivating student growth while also evaluating with objective standards. Based on my analysis, it is clear that this is a major concern in a high school English classroom.

Giving students the opportunity to succeed as an educated member of society means providing the tools necessary for students to learn and grown. The most challenging part of guiding students to success is discovering the best ways to evaluate student writing so that each student can flourish. By understanding the *why* of writing assessment, we can then move on to better understanding the *how*.

Chapter 3

Highland's Assessment Practices

After collecting responses to my interview questions from Highland's educators, I turned to Highland's benchmark[8] assessments and grading rubrics. Coding these documents allowed me to see how the standards are being integrated into English classrooms. Consequently, this analysis exposed the restrictions in student evaluation, lessons, and grading.

Part 1: Analyzing benchmark assessments and rubrics

In just one year, Highland has worked to adapt to the expectations set forth by the PARCC examination. After my analysis of scholarship for the assessment of student writing, I decided to analyze Highland's English exams to note the similarities and differences to the PARCC. I wanted to find out how Highland was preparing students for the PARCC exam, and how Highland was reaching the CCSS along the way. In analyzing Highland's exams, I discovered some interesting and appropriate similarities between the test and the state's expectations. In 2013-2014, the district's English final benchmark assessment was an expository essay. For the ninth grade exam, students were required to answer a question inspired by a theme of two previously read texts. The test was divided into three days (Appendix 1). On day one, students read one text and answered multiple-choice questions. On day two, students read a second text and answered an open-ended question. On day three, students had to write an expository essay analyzing a theme relating both texts. In the essay, students had to reference one of the texts while also making a second connection using "history, literature, popular culture, or current events." This second connection is an extension of the essay prompts provided by the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA). The directions for

Highland's assessment (the testing process) asked students to write an essay that is "coherent" and "well-written" while also "specifically and effectively" citing the texts. For this assignment, teachers did not have to make decisions on what constitutes a "coherent" and "well-written" essay because the directions include specific guidelines for success. According to this six-point list that was provided for students in the directions (seen again in Appendix 3), in order to be successful students must reach the writing standards for informative/explanatory writing as described by the CCSS. Since the English coach paraphrased these standards into a short list on the essay directions, students had a clear idea of the expectations of the writing, and teachers had a clear idea of how to assess the writing.

The rubric provided for the teacher's assessment (the evaluation of the assessment process) of this expository writing delineated specific expectations that are set forth by the CCSS. Many times, teachers would create their own grading system for essays, whether it be holistic or analytic. Mrs. Brady explains, "When I first started grading there were no rubrics. I hated the word." She emphasizes that there are "many holes in any rubric" and criterion such as "style, voice, and insight doesn't always fit in neatly." Rubrics "make it quicker but it's not as fair." In order to ensure that the standards are being met, the district English coach created a rubric (shown in Appendix 4) for grading the district assignments. After analyzing this rubric, it is clear that it was created as a close-to-exact replication of the CCSS. By having this replication, teachers can grade according to the standards and observe if students are meeting them. In addition, it also provides a window for teachers to identify weaknesses in order to improve instruction in the classroom. If many students show weakness in a specific area of writing then the

teacher should recognize this flaw and adapt lesson activities and instruction to address those needs. However, as Mrs. Brady mentioned, there are some drawbacks with grading writing with a rubric. It's beneficial and necessary that Highland works tirelessly to follow the guidelines and expectations set by the state, but the students aren't receiving a lot of the instruction and assessment feedback that is critical to their growth as a writer. Rachel Ferrara explains that though a rubric "serves as a good guide" and "gives students a purpose," it "can be restrictive" and "limit creativity." These restrictions can frustrate teachers and their desire to give students room to experiment with their writing.

There are five criteria on the district's grading rubric: Central Idea/Focus, Evidence/Development, Cohesion, Tone/Word Choice, and Conventions (Appendix 4). For each of these criteria, students can score in one of five measures: *not proficient, partially proficient, proficient, and advanced proficient*. The *advanced proficient* category is the ultimate goal. The categories for Central Idea/Focus, Cohesion, and Tone/Word Choice include language directly from writing standards 2A, 2B, 2C, and 2E[5]. The categories for Evidence/Development and Conventions, though reflected in the standards, are not outlined as specifically as the other three. If students reach the *advanced proficient* category with their writing then they are successfully meeting the CCSS. This does not mean that they are successful according to their own progress and growth. However, according to the state they exceed expectations. The language in the other three measures only changes with the first word or phrase of the description. For example, in the Central Idea/Focus category, to earn an *advanced proficient* score the student must establish a "strong, controlling thesis." The articulation of this measure decreases in complexity with the other categories. For *proficient*, the diction is simply

"establishes a *controlling* thesis" for *partially proficient* it is "establishes a *weak* controlling idea or thesis" and for *non proficient*, "*attempts* to establish idea or thesis, but with *limited* success" (Appendix 4). The same goal descriptions are provided in each category of criteria, but as the scores increase from *non proficient* to *advanced proficient*, the diction of the goal description becomes more complex, since the student should be working at a higher level. However, the definitions of these terms can vary between scorers, leaving this kind of grading almost as subjective as analytical grading. By using this writing rubric, teachers are assessing their student writing with the same result in mind: students should work towards *advanced proficient* in order to meet the state standards.

In continuing to improve the legitimacy of assignments and prepare students for college and career, the district benchmark assessments for Highland attempt to imitate the format of the PARCC exam for the 2014-2015 school year. Benchmark assessments are used to gauge student progress throughout the school year. A pre-assessment is given the first week of school to gather baseline information about students' skill level. A mid-year benchmark assessment is administered during the second marking period and the final benchmark assessment is given during the third or fourth marking period. Teachers can use this information to adapt classroom instruction and address student needs. Though these benchmark assessments have been in place for five years, the English Supervisor decided to also use the assessments as PARCC imitators to better prepare students for taking the PARCC exam this year (2015). After analyzing Highland's assessments for the 2013-2014 school year, I turned my attention to Highland's assessments for the 2014-2015 school year. For the writing portion of the test, students

are asked to connect a text to a picture (Appendix 5). They must, "consider how the two texts might connect" and still must "specifically and appropriately reference and extend the two texts." The two key words in the directions ask students to "examine" and "assess." This higher-order thinking pushes students to reach for the advanced proficient category. According to Bloom's Taxonomy, students should climb the ladder of "higher-order thinking" in order to "demonstrate mastery" (Boslaugh). An increase in complexity of questioning will raise the standards for student thinking. Students must make connections between two texts for the PARCC.

Highland's ninth grade test directs students to write an essay comparing and contrasting two texts (Appendix 5). As Highland's assignment explains, "students must support their claims with reasoning and evidence" on the PARCC. Highland's eleventh grade test shows more advanced thinking and complexity by asking students to also consider how a text and picture connect (Appendix 6). This level of complexity, and style of directions, is similar to the PARCC. The PARCC asks students to "identify and explain a theme in both passages" (PARCC). In addition, they must discuss how "the characters, events, and setting develop theme." Highland's directions for writing on the benchmark assessments are similar to PARCC's directions except that students are given a theme statement which they then must apply to the text and picture. Highland's eleventh grade expository rubric is also similar to the ninth grade rubric because they follow similar writing CCSS. However, the eleventh grade rubric shows more rigor in the *advanced proficient* category with the addition of directions such as writing that "engages the reading in the topic," having evidence that "*thoroughly* develops" and adding the word "style" to the tone/word choice category. My analysis shows that

Highland's rubrics accurately delineate the CCSS so teachers and students can work towards meeting them, while also creating more rigor for students in higher grades. Again, this is a great step for the school; however, there is frustration for teachers in losing their autonomy for evaluating student writing.

A significant finding of this research shows that there is an issue with the rubric grading, especially because teachers in the district are not trained or given practice on how to score essays using the provided system. This reflects the issues DellBovi discovered in her study: teachers aren't instructed in proper scoring methods. The rubrics are created by the English coach and shared amongst all English teachers in the district. However, there is a lack of professional development on how to appropriately analyze the criteria of a rubric and assign a grade to a student's essay. In each grading measure, teachers have to choose between two to three scores. For example, the partially proficient category requires teachers to choose a score of 16, 17, or 18. Though it is only a one to three point difference determined by a teacher's judgment, that difference could determine a change in category level and/or letter grade. Mrs. Brady expresses her frustration with this issue by explaining how sometimes she has to "fudge the number because it doesn't allow for certain aspects of grading. It makes it quicker, but it's not as fair." Taking an educated guess, or choosing a number that may benefit the overall score are ways that teachers may have to "fudge" the numbers. This example demonstrates inadequacy between matching rubrics to student performance. Though the purpose of rubric grading is to create uniformity and equality, it can be unfair when one teacher's definition of a 17 is different from another's. Even if teachers are provided professional development hours to determine what constitutes one score against another, student

writing, like any writing, is abstract and evaluating its success should be subjective. Rubrics aren't doing the job they were created to do, yet teachers still have to use them instead of their own methods which better target their own students.

Based on the teacher interviews during this study, many teachers continue to find faults with rubric grading, especially when the rubric aligns with the standards, but restricts a teacher's ability to assess and reward students' growth in writing in ways he/she thinks are most beneficial. When discussing grading with a rubric, Mrs. Brady says, "I think it hinders. I do not think it helps. The upper levels (advanced placement students) have to get away from formulaic writing and rubrics are this tight little box. They do not allow for any outside thinking." Since a rubric delineates specific requirements for a writing assignment, Mrs. Brady expresses the concern that students who have the skill level to explore their own writing will feel hindered by the demands of a rubric. Following the criteria outlined in a rubric becomes more important to students than taking writing risks. When asked about his opinion on rubrics, Justin Pelletier (a Special Education teacher) says "I think it will help our weaker writers by giving them direction and focus, but will hinder our better writers." The standards provide a goal and a level of expectation. However, there is difficulty in measuring if students are properly progressing with their writing, exploring ideas and taking risks, while also maintaining a strict guideline and formula in order to earn a high grade.

Part 2: PARCC in the classroom

According to Mary Jane Kurabinski, director of The New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards for English Language Arts, students need to be exposed to more complex texts to prepare them for "college, career, and life." If teachers are focusing on

this goal, and providing instruction that will reach these expectations, then they are doing their job. However, if they ignore these goals, and set to teach and assess our student writing according to the values and methods from their own personal agenda, they may be doing their students a disservice when they will be expected to perform in college or their career. For teachers, this can be difficult. Their passion is to teach their students how they see fit; to give students the tools to think abstractly and express themselves with freedom and personal interest. The truth is, teachers have to be dispassionate in order to ensure their students are reaching the standards, as these standards become the prototype for success outside of high school.

Daily assignments in a public high school English classroom may not mirror PARCC expectations, but these PARCC expectations are not "real world" writing. It is rare that, after high school, students will find themselves writing an essay that compares an article and a picture, or writing an essay that responds to a quotation. Students who are going into the work force, trade school, or military may never see such writing ventures. Instead, they may have to write statements for court or proposals for projects. Therefore, it is the job of an English teacher to expose different genres of writing to his/her students that will benefit them in their future. The CCSS do a decent job at delineating the kinds of writing that students may see more frequently, such as expository and argument writing. However, the PARCC doesn't seem to have the same goals, though it is grown from the same standards. The specificity of the PARCC testing hampers a student's opportunities to show their level of skill while also restricting what can be taught in the classroom. It is unlikely for students to need to write about the ways in which a text and picture are related, and to do so in a time-restricted fashion outside of

high school. Succeeding on the PARCC and meeting the standards should not be the only measure of success for students to graduate high school. Mrs. Geyer explains,

> "The writing assignments that we are doing per marking period aren't necessarily for PARCC. They're not constructed in the same way where students are always looking at a few different sources like they are in the analytic essays, but we do have our research project that does that… I don't want to do too much of the timed in-class writing because it's not really "real world" writing. But testing is "real world" to some extent, so it's unavoidable."

Highland's English supervisor explains the balance that our English teachers try to maintain in the classroom. Not every assignment can lead students towards the PARCC, or any other standardized test. Students need to have freedom to explore different avenues of writing and not always write for the test. Teaching towards a test may be a way to focus students on a specific task, but it also deters them from learning other genres of writing. In addition, it hinders teachers from being able to teach writing in the ways they think are most appropriate and beneficial. As used in the context of Mrs. Geyer's explanation, "real world" writing is writing outside of a high school's walls. Résumé's, thank-you letters, research proposals, and business letters are examples of "real world" writing. Unfortunately, teachers lack the time to really focus on many of these modes because they need to prepare their students for the PARCC test and also ensure that the standards are being met in their lesson plans. If circumstances allowed, students would have more opportunity to explore different writing genres, especially ones that would be beneficial to them outside of high school. Yes, there are time constraints on "real world" writing due to dead lines or submission dates; however, it is rare that a person will have to sit at a desk with a timer and be asked to complete a rather detailed and rigorous essay writing assignment. Except for, of course, standardized testing, which

as Mrs. Geyer explains, is also "real world" writing. In trade schools and college, testing is a familiar animal. Because tests don't disappear after high school, they are considered a "real world" application. Still, they shouldn't be the only measure of success.

Despite the time constraints and lack of autonomy for English teachers, students need to be prepared for the assessments that the state will administer. Though teachers may not agree with teaching towards a test, they have to prepare their students for the inevitable. The HSPA was a graduation requirement. The PARCC, which has now replaced the HSPA, is headed towards that same direction. According to David C Hespe, the acting commissioner for the Department of Education in the State of New Jersey, if students do not succeed on the PARCC then they will not be eligible for graduation starting with the class of 2016. Highland works to prepare for this requirement. Miss Wood explains, "What our writing assignments could be doing more is pairing; putting texts together and making kids look at multiple texts while they are writing." This is the kind of strategy that the PARCC requires. Highland's tests aren't exactly PARCC models, but they do reflect questions that PARCC asks. Marcie Geyer explains,

> "We are not putting them in those exact situations of the PARCC test, but we are doing what the standards want us to do. I feel confident with how we are preparing the students. I think we are going to keep getting better at it. It's been a transition."

Moving from HSPA to PARCC and adjusting to the changing standards since 2009 is indeed a transition. According to New Jersey's Department of Education,

> "In 2011 New Jersey became a member of the Governing Board of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) to help to develop new assessments that would address some of the challenges that New Jersey faces in education such as the dissatisfaction with current testing methods that do not fully measure state standards."

The Black Horse Pike Regional School District tries to follow the expectations of the state as much as possible for their student body. For teachers, it is a challenge to find a balance between teaching for a state test (and ensuring their students are meeting the standards) and giving students the opportunity to grow in their writing. The focus on the testing and standards hinders the time and freedom to focus on each student's individual writing progress. Justin Pelletier, an Inclusion English teacher says, "I think we are trying. I think it's really difficult. Writing is an art form. It's hard to teach somebody how to be an artist. I don't know if it's realistic. I don't know if the standards are realistic- I don't know if everyone can write an outstanding essay." This is true; teaching the art of writing is difficult. If Highland's assignments are at least reflecting those standards, then students have a better chance of meeting them. Miss Ferrara explains, "Black Horse Pike uses a rubric that aligns with the state standards each marking period. Our rubrics change and are designed for specific writing assignments designated to specific standards." For Highland, a lot of the work is done for the teachers. The curriculum is dedicated to reflecting the standards for the students. Mrs. Brady corroborates this, "I'm finding that teaching the upper level classes…they are coming much more prepared…and know how to go about different types of writing. What we are doing is covering the standards and making them (the students) more responsible writers." Students are succeeding in meeting the standards, but the ability to measure growth with the rubrics is still a problem.

Part 3: Fighting for balance

Developing assignments to both reach the standards and reach the students can be a challenge for teachers. Creating appropriate and effective ways to assess their writing

gives teachers the opportunity to elicit student interest and connections, while also assessing them in the ways the state requires. Again, teachers are trying to find a balance between measuring student growth and reaching the standards. When asked how essay topics are assigned, Miss Ferrara said, "Typically, I'll use the writers' notebook as a springboard and I'll give topical ideas." Allowing students freedom of choice (with limited guidance) provides them the opportunity to write in ways that will prompt success. As Inoue suggests, if student writing always reflects the "expected format" of standardized tests, they lack opportunity to find success in writing about their own ideas (Inoue 330). Unfortunately, the creator of the CCSS, David Coleman, thinks differently. While speaking at the New York Department of Education, Coleman bluntly states, "as you grow up in this world you realize people really don't give a shit about what you feel or what you think." However, pedagogy cannot ignore the text-to-self connections that students make in the classroom. These are necessary movements in writing for students to learn and grow.

At Highland Regional High School, teachers incorporate "Writer's Workshop," a district mandated program that all English teachers were trained in during professional development. The program is designed to motivate students to write for pleasure and experience during extended periods of time in their "Writer's Notebooks." Teachers provide mini lessons on grammar and style using their own writing and mentor texts, and students write in provided composition notebooks for different periods of time. The notebook also serves as a bank of ideas, vocabulary, and writing practice where students can freely express themselves and experiment with their writing.

Observing ways in which the writer's workshop is effective in the teaching of writing became the next step for this study. The teachers at Highland delineate their lesson plans on an online cite called Oncourse.[7] Miss Ferrara shared a few of her lesson plans on writing workshop to show how she teaches writing in her classroom. While teaching and assigning narrative writing, Miss Ferrara provided two mini-lessons: one on dialogue and one on narrative openings. For her lesson on dialogue, her essential question on the first day was, "What is the difference between dialogue and inner thought?" After discussion and examples, students were instructed to practice using dialogue in their writer's notebooks. Miss Ferrara appropriately cited the correct CCSS to this lesson: Standard 3b for 9th-10th grade English, which states: "Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters." With this lesson on using dialogue, Miss Ferrara prepares her students to meet this particular standard. Day two provided another mini lesson on narrative beginnings. Her objective for the day's lesson was to "establish various techniques to begin a story." Just as Mr. Pelletier explained, it's important to elicit student interest to help them experiment with writing. To do this, Miss Ferrara played movie clips from such films as *Jurassic Park*, *Up*, and *The Dark Knight*, and asked her students to explain how each moment was memorable. From there, she asked students to practice writing memorable story openings in their writer's notebooks. Again, she appropriately referenced standard 3a, "Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or

events." Like all of the English teachers at Highland, Miss Ferrara is helping her students meet the standards of writing through her classroom instruction and activities.

After the initial stages of writing are complete, the art of revisions serves an important purpose in the assessment of student writing. Having students identify the strengths and weaknesses of their own writing and the writing of their peers is an effective way to give them the tools for their own learning. Mrs. Brady discusses how she conducts peer revision in her own classroom.

> "I try to pair them up. I'll give them back their essay with a peer-edit sheet with specific areas they need to comment on. I encourage them to write on the paper. It must be double-spaced so there is room for peer comments and questions. They are not editing for grammar and spelling. They need to point out where there are holes or unanswered questions."

As Liana Heitin suggests, making students responsible for the work and providing opportunity for them to identify areas that need improvement in writing gives them the autonomy to identify issues and work to correct them. Miss Ferrara comments that "reflections are helpful too" in giving students the chance to consider their writing critically and work towards improvement. Not only do revisions provide formative assessment during the writing process, but revisions also give teachers the opportunity to identify how students are learning and growing with their writing. The assessment rubrics lack revisions as a necessary part of the assessment of student writing.

In addition to student revisions, there is true value in feedback as a way for students to improve their writing. After writing a narrative essay in Mrs. Brady's class, students provide feedback to each other, while also receiving feedback from Mrs. Brady. Along with the rubric grading, Mrs. Brady provides analytical comments on her student writing to help them learn and grow as writers during Writer's Workshop. As the NWP

believes, evaluating a student's writing in both ways is most beneficial (LeMahieu and Singer). When I analyzed a student's narrative essay from Mrs. Brady's class, I noticed she left comments such as, "Take a look at this and see if you feel the gaps and shifts. It's very good, but there are areas where you kind of lose the flow." She directs her student to self reflect on his writing, which is a great form of assessment. This reflection will help him recognize areas of weakness and work to fix them while also reinforcing and celebrating moments of success. Another comment she wrote said, "I think this is your least essential part and could be condensed and put into the next paragraph." With this comment, Mrs. Brady tries to help her student's writing structure and organization. When he successfully makes the corrections and changes on the final draft, she leaves the comment, "Yes-It is successfully executed" to celebrate his accomplishments.

Finding student interest, in addition to reaching the standards, is a task that teachers must do in order for their students to be invested in a writing assignment. Mr. Pelletier discusses similar methods in his explanation about assigning essay topics: "I try to find student interest. I try to find things that I think they can research easily. I try to choose topics that I think they'll have an easier time writing, and making content." Though these are important methods in "hooking" students, it's important to remember that students may not always write about topics that interest them once they graduate high school. According to Mrs. Brady, the topic assignment has the most flexibility as long as the writing process and product meet the standards. Making connections with the literature is a pertinent way to increase comprehension of complex texts and improve analytical skills in student writing. The advantage here is that our teachers have freedom to choose topics for their students, or give students the opportunity to choose their own

topics, as long as the standards are being met. "I look to the standards on the curriculum map. I'll look at what skills need to be covered for the marking period, so when we focus our writing, that's what we would look towards-those particular standards" (Ferrara).

Chapter 4

Results: Defining Success

As indicated through the background analysis, educator interviews, and coding of Highland's assessment practices and evaluation tools, because of the demand of the Common Core State Standards and standardized testing, public schools have no choice but to prepare students to meet the standards and do well on the tests. Following this protocol restricts teacher freedom for evaluating student writing in ways they find are most beneficial for their own students. Most educators feel that success on a test, or exceeding a state standard, does not constitute success for student writing. To properly assess students, teachers should have the freedom to provide multiple forms of evaluations, suited to their students' needs. Most importantly, measuring a student's growth in writing, which cannot be done through standards and testing, is the best way to gauge a student's learning.

Part 1: How is Student Writing Successful?

If student writing meets or exceeds the state standards, does that mean that that piece of writing is "successful?" What makes student writing successful? Before standards, teachers were responsible for defining success to their students. That which denotes successful writing needs to be individualized for each student. Teachers work to help their students grow and achieve their own personal successes in their writing. Through Writer's Workshop, differentiation in instruction, writing conferences, time spent revising, and feedback, teachers can reach students and help them alter, modify, and transform their writing. Earning a one hundred percent on a writing assignment based on a CCSS-inspired rubric means that the student has achieved the expectations

outlined by the state for that writing assignment. However, if that student didn't learn how to improve their structure or better articulate their thoughts because they only met the specified criterion on the rubric, then they didn't grow and achieve their own success. As Inoue suggests, students need to understand and internalize criteria for success and unrestrained freedom may become a detriment to their learning. However, this focus on earning a specific "grade" hinders the freedom students need to learn how to grow as a writer (Inoue 333). For example, a student in Mr. Pelletier's special education class may have success with spelling more efficiently with basic level vocabulary while a student in Mrs. Brady's advanced placement class may have success with improving the structure and diction in a satirical piece speaking to societal issues. Each student shows growth in their own way which is determined by their own progression and not on the attainment of a standard. With such range in learning styles and ability, success cannot be measured on an equal foundation as state standards project.

As I conducted my interviews of the educators at Highland Regional High School, I noticed a common theme in answers to the question, "how do you define success in student writing?" Miss Ferrara explained that "if students gained knowledge or skill," she considers the writing a success. If a student has learned something through the process, then they have grown. Mr. Pelletier answered, "A successful piece of writing is that they've addressed the topic and the requirements for the pieces of writing and that they've grown." Mrs. Brady provides a similar answer, "It conveys the emotion, tone, focus, and the intent of the writer. That it shows, growth." Marcie Geyer adds, "A success is when they can recognize their weaknesses and learn from them." The English coach, Tara Wood, provides a great example to answer this question,

"If a kid doesn't know how to break an essay into paragraphs, then by the end of the year is breaking the essay into paragraphs, and maybe using transitions, that's success. Whereas a kid who walked in already doing that, success would look different for him." "So success is progress."

Highland's Vice Principal, Christina Collazo, in charge of English, answered this question best of all.

"A successful piece will show growth…taking the baseline data of where the student started, and how they've grown in that time period. Whether it's considered successful enough to make it in the outside world or college…there are going to be higher levels to reach. Can they pass a particular standardized test or state exam? That might show success, but we need to celebrate the smaller things. If we can get the student to be able to express themselves in a clear manner…that's success. That doesn't mean writing a term paper or research project. Weakness would be if they are unable to express themselves, if they can't use basic sentence structure…if they can't fill out a form using basic skills…they will be unsuccessful in the future. We have to help them thrive in society. Failure is going to come when they can't achieve those minor successes."

Finding and celebrating the small successes, through formative assessments, is crucial in helping our students grow as writers. Watching them make improvements and strides based off of early assessment information shows success. Working to help students express themselves appropriately and clearly through written language is how educators help them achieve their future goals. Just as Wardle explains, the "literate development"… "informs the growth of a person's writing abilities" (Wardle 108).

Part 2: Analysis of Results

This research project works to answer the following question: Can teachers balance the requirements of state standards for student writing and also be effective in assessing their students' ability to grow? Through close reading and analysis of Highland's assessment documents, interview questions with teachers and administrators, and background knowledge of writing assessment studies and research, it is clear that the

state restricts the freedom necessary for teachers to properly and effectively assess their students' writing. The integration of the standards and standardized testing into the educational experience of a student is too confining and impedes on his/her ability and opportunity to grow and develop without strict expectations.

The one common thread communicated in the interview answers I received is that success in writing is measured by growth. Meeting the standards, and succeeding on standardized tests, was not a major part, or even a minor part, in some of the interview answers of these highly qualified educators. They emphasized the importance of achieving another goal: growth. Though it is delineated in a teacher's job to prepare students to pass the exams set forth by the state, and to meet the standards for writing, each teacher provided an answer that went beyond what the state wants. Teachers want their students to succeed outside of the school walls, and in the "real world." Passing the PARCC exam is part of that success, but not the whole part. In a public high school English classroom, success is defined not by the standards, but by the growth of the student in their written expression.

The CCSS must be reflected in every lesson plan that a teacher creates which promotes universality amongst teachers, but also places restrictions on teacher autonomy. Fortunately, the language of the CCSS usually articulates a teacher's normal classroom practices. However, it adds additional stress by demanding that time be spent documenting these practices and proving that the standards are being met. Writing lessons should be open to interpretation by the teacher's instructional methods and the various learners in his/her classroom. This process is necessary in a complete evaluation. The standards place boundaries on these methods. Though it may be a challenge to

evaluate growth in student writing because of the restrictions of the standards, teachers must continue to assess writing as a whole, to celebrate the small successes, and not just the final product.

Is it reasonable for these standards to be addressed in the public classroom? When asked if Highland's writing assessments are aligned with the standards, English supervisor Mrs. Geyer explained that, "they are aligned with the standards, and the standards clearly outline narrative, informational, and argument writing, which we are doing at each grade level, at some point throughout the year, and we are trying to look at what they really need more focus on at each grade level." The focus needs to be more on their development and growth in writing, not just ensuring that they are completing the genres delineated by the state. Accomplishing these assignments because they are expected does not mean that students are learning and succeeding as writers. Writing assignments are being done, but not being done well because there is no time to evaluate the progression of the writing. It is reasonable to have standards that guide teaching and provide goals for students. It is unreasonable to expect that each classroom and each student can meet these standards.

The assignments at the Black Horse Pike Regional School District change and adapt each year to better meet the standards. The District wants to ensure that the educators and students are meeting the CCSS, as outlined in the district's mission statement. Luckily, the assignments set forth by the state are assignments that many teachers already teach. These modes of writing are naturally incorporated into many classrooms because of their importance and relevance for "real world" writing. Mrs. Brady corroborates this alignment of assignments and standards:

"We are fortunate that our curriculum lines up all of our assignments with our standards. In all of my classes, with the exception of timed writing, we go through the writing process, so from start to finish we hit just about all of the standards along the way, kind of accidentally. That's where I have faith in the standards because it's something we are already doing."

Mrs. Brady explains that her assignments "naturally" target the standards in her classroom. The final writing products that teachers must assign are developed from the CCSS (students must write an argument research paper, expository essay, and personal narrative story). These specific assignments were created five years ago, when Mrs. Geyer was hired as the new English supervisor. In addition to those final products, the writing process also targets the standards through grammar and vocabulary lessons, work with structure and development, and writing revision, just to name a few. Therefore, Mrs. Brady shows how the CCSS are already a part of her classroom instruction.

In many cases, the standards provide a succinct description of practices that are already within the curriculum of many schools. For example, standard 3D for ninth and tenth grade writing states, "Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters." Teaching word choice and sensory description is something that most English teachers already do in their classrooms. Standards like 3D simply verbalize an already common practice in teaching writing. Having standards that are not an anomaly to what is already taught is helpful in defining a curriculum; however, it limits the opportunity for truly assessing a student's writing capability. Additionally, the added pressure this imposes upon teachers hinders their ability to look beyond the standards and help the students achieve their true potential. Though many of the standards are already part of the

curriculum, they limit freedom of instruction and the focus of meeting the standards takes time away from planning lessons that reach students' individual needs as they are exposed.

The issue is balance. Between trying to address the state standards and prepare students for standardized tests, while also trying to present a love of writing and teach students how to express themselves through written word, the job of an English teacher at a public high school becomes one that requires constant adaptation. New Jersey wants to universalize, to hold all students to the same expectations, and to prepare them for college and career after high school. To keep our students in line with each other and not allow any to fall behind the curve of expectations are the desires of the state. These desires are not selfish; it's important for students to receive quality education and have the same opportunities no matter which public high school they attend. However, student population is diverse. Students have individual strengths and weaknesses, come from varied backgrounds, have different learning styles, and should not be generalized. Teachers are proficient at analyzing these differences and bringing out the best in their students.

In the near future, it's anticipated that students will be required to pass the PARCC in order to graduate high school. Our district assessment addresses the standards while also reflecting the kinds of questions and problems students will be faced with on the PARCC examination. With that being said, my research points to the imbalance seen between time allotted for necessary preparation versus the time needed for autonomy in teaching. English teachers work to interest our students, to open doors of experimentation with writing, and offer them feedback to help them self-reflect and

improve their writing. Assessing student capability and growth should be the main focus. This will better prepare students to be well-rounded educated adults. Teachers have the capacity to make informed decisions related to this process.

With each writing lesson, and each writing assessment, teachers are given the task to reach the standards the state has presented. Teachers acknowledge the standards in their lesson plans, and use rubrics that are a reflection of those same standards. Though rubrics may allow for more convenient grading, they are restrictive in feedback for students and make what should be a subjective process, an objective one. Because students have different writing strengths and weaknesses, the evaluation should be subjective and analytical in order to evaluate areas that need improvement and offer a more balanced and thorough assessment. Rubrics can often be too specific which hampers a teacher's ability to provide a full evaluation and limits a student's opportunity to think and write beyond the indicated expectations. If given the time, teachers have the ability to ensure that students are receiving the proper feedback they need in order to improve their writing. Having familiarity with students' writing ability enables teachers to provide a more comprehensive assessment of their change and progression. Change encourages growth and affords transformation within their writing, therefore promoting a better transition to life outside of high school.

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The question posed at the beginning of this research project was, "Can teachers balance the requirements of state standards for student writing and also be effective in assessing their students' ability to grow?" After the analysis of scholarship on the

assessment of student writing, interviews with teachers, supervisors, and administrators at a New Jersey Public High school, analysis of grading rubrics, writing assignments, the PARCC test, teacher lesson plans and analytical comments, the answer is that teachers are hindered from properly evaluating the development of their students' writing. Even though the alignment of standards is already apparent in many English classrooms, they fail to address critical issues of student growth. The challenge is finding the best ways to assess student growth in an age of standardized thinking and evaluation. Accepting the different learning needs and skill levels for students allows for more opportunities for them to succeed as individual writers. Amongst the stress and pressure of providing assignments and assessments that specifically address these standards teachers lose the autonomy necessary for evaluating student writing in ways they find are most beneficial for their students. Teachers spend over thirty hours a week with their students for ten months. They are exposed to their students' lives, interests, and struggles on a daily basis. Therefore, only teachers can truly determine how a student changes and develops their writing, not a list of specified expectations, or an isolated exam. Their growth is the true measure of success. Standards and state tests are mandatory components legislated for high school English classes. This requires time and effort that hinders teachers' ability to evaluate abstractly and effectively gage their students' growth in writing. The focus must continue to be on the process of writing assessment and not just the final product.

Having state standards to create uniformity amongst high schools in New Jersey is beneficial. However, the standards should offer more autonomy for teachers and more room for interpretation in each classroom. In addition, meeting the standards should not

be the ultimate goal in education. Using them as a guide for instruction is constructive, but they cannot be the only medium of success. Standardized tests should be re-considered for their effectiveness and validity in determining the skill level of a student. An isolated exam does not adequately describe a student's ability. Writing assessment should be done through a variety of modes and identifying a student's growth and progress through the writing experience should determine their success on the assignment. More work should be done with the CCSS and with the PARCC exam before either can be successfully executed in classrooms across the state.

Trying to balance the state's expectations with individual student needs is a difficult endeavor. Teachers need more autonomy with writing assessment so that students have opportunity to learn and grow as writers. The CCSS and PARCC exam need to be not only re-evaluated for effectiveness, but also need to be reconstructed to address the individual needs of different learners.   Success is not determined through the reaching of standards or the score of a test. Success is defined through student development and positive change. The job for teachers should focus more on the progression and maturity of their students' writing and less on the rigorous expectations allocated by the state.   Student growth cannot be measured through specified criteria and test questions. Teachers need to be provided the time and tools to evaluate their students writing with less restrictions. Teachers have to teach for the state, but more importantly, they should to teach for their students.

Appendix 1

Teacher Interview Questions

Student Writing Assignments

• How do you decide on an essay topic that for students?

• In what ways do you (or don't you) align the standards and expectations for the writing

assignment?

Rubric Grading

• What do you think are the strengths and weakness of rubric grading (in general)?

• Do you think rubrics help or hinder a student's writing process?

• How can the scores you provide help students improve as writers?

• How can you differentiate your instruction to address the weaknesses outlined in the

rubric?

Analytic Grading

• How do you grade analytically? What do you look for?

• Do you focus more on content or structure?

• Do you write comments in the margins, within the writing, or at the end of the paper

and why do you make these particular decisions?

• Do you fix errors throughout the entire essay? The beginning? Or not at all?

Teacher-Student Conferences

• How do you conduct a teacher/student conference? What is your goal for the

conference?

• Do you believe having these conferences help students understand the criticism of their writing and work towards improvement, or do you think there is a more beneficial way to do this?

<u>Peer Conferences</u>

• How do you organize peer conferencing in your classroom?

• Do you provide students with any sort of form or guide for assessing each other's papers?

• How are these conferences beneficial for students? How could they be improved?

<u>Assessing Student Writing</u>

-How do you define a successful piece of writing?

-How is the assessment of student writing reaching the standards set forth by the state?

Appendix 2

Administrator Interview Questions

Assessing Student Writing

- Why is writing assessed?

- How can the evaluation and assessment of student writing influence writing
  pedagogy and improve growth in student writing?

- What constitutes failure and success in student writing?

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of both holistic and analytic scoring?

- Do you think our current writing assessments are preparing students for PARCC?

- How is the assessment of student writing reaching the standards set forth by the
  state?

Rubric Grading

- What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of rubric grading (in general)?

- Do you think rubrics help or hinder a student's writing process?

- How do you think rubric scores can help students improve as writers?

Appendix 3

9th Grade Benchmark Essay 2013-2014

9TH GRADE ENGLISH   FINAL BENCHMARK, DAY 3
"SONNY'S BLUES" BY JAMES BALDWIN AND "A VOICE FOR THE LONELY" BY STEPHEN COREY

PART IV: EXPOSITORY ESSAY

Directions: The following essay prompt is based on the final narrative and informational benchmark texts.

This question requires you to compose a coherent, well-written essay that specifically and effectively references at least one of the two texts you read over the last two days. You should refer to the text and other evidence or examples as you develop your thesis or position. Remember to cite sources and line numbers accurately. *Your thinking and explanation should be central; the evidence and examples you choose should support your thinking. Avoid simple summaries.*

Introduction:

Over the past two days, you've read two texts, one from "Sonny's Blues" and the other from "A Voice for the Lonely," that deal with the importance and power of music in people's lives. Carefully and quickly review those texts. Then, write the following:

Assignment:

How does music inspire, influence, or change people?

You must reference at least one of the texts in your response. You should also reference history, literature, popular culture, and/or current events, etc… as you develop your response.

In order to be successful, your essay must include:

1. A clear central idea as outlined in a thesis statement
2. An engaging introduction and suitable conclusion
3. Transitions between ideas, sentences, and paragraphs to maintain focus and flow
4. Specific textual evidence from and reference to "Sonny's Blues and/or "A Voice for the Lonely" (with proper MLA citations)
5. A formal, academic tone with appropriate use of sophisticated vocabulary
6. Proper use of the conventions of English grammar, usage, and mechanics

--------You are encouraged to brainstorm and plan before beginning.-------

Appendix 4

9-10ᵗʰ Grade Expository Rubric

Name:	Scoring Rubric for Text-Based Expository Essays (9-10)			Total: _____%
	NOT PROFICIENT 10-12	**PARTIALLY PROFICIENT** 13-15	**PROFICIENT** 16-18	**ADVANCED PROFICIENT** 19-20
CENTRAL IDEA & FOCUS	☐ Attempts to establish a controlling idea or thesis, but with limited success; may be missing an introduction and/or conclusion, has little or no focus	☐ Establishes a weak controlling idea or thesis in the beginning and closes with an insufficient conclusion, contains some lapses or inconsistencies in focus	☐ Establishes a controlling thesis in the introduction and closes with a relevant conclusion, maintains focus on the thesis throughout the response.	☐ Establishes a strong, controlling thesis in the introduction and closes with an insightful conclusion, maintains a clear, compelling focus on the thesis throughout the response.
EVIDENCE & DEVELOPMENT	☐ Contains limited facts and examples and/or examples unrelated to the topic or thesis; does not develop the topic	☐ Provides facts, definitions, concrete details and/or examples that attempt to develop and explain the topic or thesis with limited or vague references to the text	☐ Provides relevant facts, definitions, concrete details and/or quotations that sufficiently develop and explain the thesis, including appropriate textual evidence	☐ Provides significant and effective facts, definitions, concrete details and/or quotations that fully develop and explain the thesis, including specific textual evidence
COHESION	☐ Does not connect the topic to the evidence; contains few, if any, words, phrases, and clauses to link the major sections of the text.	☐ Attempts to connect the topic to the evidence, but connections are insufficient or inappropriate; contains limited words, phrases, and clauses to link the major sections of the text.	☐ Connects the topic to the evidence; uses words, phrases, and clauses to link the major sections of the text	☐ Identifies and explains the relationship between the topic and the evidence; strategically uses words, phrases, and clauses to link the major sections of the text
TONE AND WORD CHOICE	☐ Illustrates an inconsistent and inappropriate tone and lacks awareness of topic-relevant vocabulary	☐ Illustrates a limited awareness of formal tone and of topic-relevant and audience-appropriate vocabulary	☐ Establishes a formal and objective tone by using language and topic-relevant vocabulary appropriate to purpose & audience	☐ Establishes and maintains an engaging, formal, and objective tone by using sophisticated language and topic-specific vocabulary appropriate to purpose & audience
CONVENTIONS	☐ Demonstrates little understanding and use of standard English conventions of usage and mechanics along with MLA requirements	☐ Demonstrates inconsistent understanding and use of standard English conventions of usage and mechanics along with MLA requirements, including parenthetical citations	☐ Uses standard English conventions of usage and mechanics along with MLA requirements, including parenthetical citations	☐ Intentionally uses standard English conventions of usage and mechanics along with MLA requirements, including parenthetical citations

*If the essay does not fulfill the standards represented by the descriptions on this rubric, the grade will earn a score below 50% per teacher discretion.
**A student who does not address the writing prompt or produces an unintelligible response will earn a "0."

Appendix 5

9-10th Grade Pre-Assessment

*See Supplementary Materials

Appendix 6

11th-12th Grade Benchmark Assessment

*See Supplementary Materials

End Notes

[1]*High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA):* "The High School Proficiency Assessment is used to determine student achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics as specified in the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards. First-time eleventh grade students who fail the HSPA in March of their junior year will have an opportunity to retest in October and March of their senior year." See the State of New Jersey Department of Education for more information.

[2]*Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC):* "PARCC is based on the core belief that assessment should work as a tool for enhancing teaching and learning. Because the assessments are aligned with the new, more rigorous Common Core State Standards (CCSS), they ensure that every child is on a path to college and career readiness by measuring what students should know at each grade level." See PARCConline.org for more information.

[3]*Common Core State Standards (CCSS):* "The Common Core is a set of high-quality academic standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy (ELA). These learning goals outline what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade. The standards were created to ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life, regardless of where they live." See corestandards.org for more information.

[4]*No Child Left Behind (NCLB):* "The NCLB Act requires students in public schools to meet clear-cut academic proficiency goals within specific timeframes and enforces corrective actions on public schools whose students do not meet the goals" (Ginsburg and Jamie). See the U.S Department of Education website for more information.

[5]*2A,2B,2C,2E:* Writing Standards for 11th and 12th grade students:
2a - Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.
2b - Develop the topic with well-chosen, relevant, and sufficient facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic.
2c - Use appropriate and varied transitions to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships among complex ideas and concepts.
2e - Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.
See Corestandards.org for more information.

[6]*Bloom's Taxonomy:* "Bloom's Taxonomy consists of six major intellectual categories, arranged in increasing order of complexity: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Bloom and colleagues assumed that mastering any level first required mastering the previous level" (Boslaugh). See Benjamin S. Bloom's book *A Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* for more information.

[7]*Oncourse Lesson Plans:* Website used for submitting teacher lesson plans. Refer to oncoursesystems.com.

[8]*Benchmark Assessments:* A series of exams used to determine a student's current skill level. Highland provides a pre-benchmark assessment, mid-year benchmark assessment, and final benchmark assessment.

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