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# Perceptions of Eighth Grade State Writing Assessment at a Nationally Recognized Middle School

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PERCEPTIONS OF EIGHTH GRADE STATE WRITING ASSESSMENT AT  
A NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED MIDDLE SCHOOL

by

Jillian Quandt

A THESIS

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PERCEPTIONS OF EIGHTH GRADE STATE WRITING ASSESSMENT AT  
A NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED MIDDLE SCHOOL

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This study seeks to understand how one at-risk middle school in Nebraska is consistently beating eighth grade Nebraska State Writing Assessment (NESA-W) averages. The school has significant populations of Hispanic, special education, and low-income students. The study answers the following two research questions. What strategies does the at-risk school utilize to enable its students to exceed the Nebraska average on the NESA-W? What attitudes do the school's writing teachers, administrators, students, and their parents hold about the NESA-W? Students and their parents answered a multiple-choice survey; teachers and administrators answered a longer, open-ended survey. The researcher used a combination of her own experience teaching at the school and the surveys' emergent themes and subthemes to identify three prescriptive (district required) successful NESA-W preparation strategies: district writing, middle school concept, and professional learning communities. The researcher also identified four discretionary strategies (teacher directed) using only the teacher and administrator surveys: staff individual characteristics, preparation time, curriculum, and the five-paragraph essay. The study determined that teachers and administrators at the at-risk school have a positive attitude about the NESA-W and generally do not find the test to be problematic. Students and their parents feel that the test is worthwhile and that success is attainable.

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### *Preface*

*I know the computer lab is ready for testing because I arrived at school extra early today. All of the posters with writing tips have been taken down replacing rainbow colors with water stains and scuffed paint. After an internal debate that went on for longer than I am willing to admit, I decided that the noise from two large fans is less distracting than the smell of a small space stuffed with old computers and 25 thirteen and fourteen year-olds, some of whom will have P.E. just before they take the test. The computer screens are locked into the Nebraska State Writing Assessment website, and the two especially slow computers are marked off limits with large signs. I am surprised when students start lining up outside my door but then remember that there are no bells today because NESAW testing takes much longer than one class period. The principal does not want the bells distracting the 8<sup>th</sup> graders while they work. I put on my best smile and open up the door.*

*“Please find the computer with your name on it and take a seat. Nate! You cannot trade seats,” I say with the smile still plastered to my face. “This computer has my name on it,” the usually amicable but hyperactive boy insists. I consider retorting back that I am not blind and saw him move the sticky note, but instead decide to call on Beth who has her hand in the air and hope Nate decides to take the hint. He does. Beth says she needs to use the restroom before the test. She looks like she is about to cry. I decide it is a good idea to recommend that everyone quickly use the restroom because they are not allowed to leave during the test. Half the class leaves. I catch Beth on her way out and ask if everything is okay. She says she is nervous about the test, and I tell her not to worry and that I’m sure she will do fine. “Are you sure?” she asks zinging more attitude*

*than usual. Instantly my hesitation betrays me. Even though Beth works hard in school, and I tutor her after school for free at her mother's request, the substantial progress she made will likely not be enough for her to pass this test. I tell her to "just do your best" and a flash of anger lights up her face but is gone as fast as it came. She leaves to use the restroom with her eyes on her feet.*

*Nate is the last one to reenter the room. As he walks in he loudly asks, "Do we have to take the test?" Miranda, the most diligent student in the class, rolls her eyes and tries to scoot her chair away from him. I feel guilty for sitting Miranda next to Nate because I know teachers, including myself, are often guilty of trying to calm disruptive students by sitting them next to a positive example. I give Nate a stern look as I quickly take attendance. Jessie and Trey are absent and Grace is taking the test with a scribe per her IEP. Nolan is taking the test with the behavior room teacher- thank God.*

*We are ready to begin. I was given a special packet of instructions for proctoring the test. I read the directions aloud and stutter over an awkward phrase. Students don't seem to notice because they have heard this spiel before and zone me out, except Miranda who raises her eyebrows. I hand out the password codes and all students begin the test. We have practiced with this program a few times, and it irritates me that most kids worry about changing the color of the background on the test before they even read the essay prompt. Even Miranda chooses a soft pink before reading the prompt. I am the only one it seems who is interested in seeing the essay topic.*

*Nate raises his hand. "I accidentally submitted it," he says with a look of fake confusion on his face. Everyone nearby turns to stare, and his buddies snicker loudly. There is no way to accidentally submit a test; the test requires two different confirmations*



*of submission, and the students all know to wait until they are completely done before hitting submit. There is nothing I can do to get the test back, so I send Nate to the office as punishment, secretly worrying that I am going to be the one in trouble. Taking a deep breath I tell myself there was nothing I could do. I continue circling the room for the next two hours feeling a range of emotions. I'm proud of how much they are writing and see evidence of outlining and proofreading, relieved that no one from the state came to make sure I correctly proctored the test even though I would not cheat in my wildest dreams, but mostly I'm filled with a nagging nervousness. Did I do a good job getting students ready for the test? Will scores go up this year? What happens if they go down?*

## *Chapter 1—Introduction*

### **1.1 Research Topic and Problem**

Equity through education has been an important goal of U.S. legislation for many years. Most famously, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) aimed to bridge the gap at-risk students face through school accountability for student achievement. NCLB, though perhaps the most widely known, is not the first or even the latest legislation purportedly designed to help underachieving students including racial minorities, impoverished students, special education students, and English language learners. NCLB is similar in name and in purpose to many past legislative acts and to its successor, The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Under ESSA, a few different factors are used to assess school accountability. However, as it has been since Congress enacted NCLB in 2002, standardized test scores remain the largest factor in evaluating schools. These tests are meant to hold schools responsible when students fail to acquire the skills deemed necessary for college and career paths in the United States. Standardized testing has been packaged as a great equalizer, a way to prioritize achievement across racial and socioeconomic boundaries.

Unsurprisingly, the problem of successfully serving the needs of at-risk students by imparting the necessary skills for passing standardized assessments remains unsolved by many schools. Failure to provide students with the skills required to pass standardized tests exposes schools to a number of direct consequences both legally and ethically. Schools with high percentages of at-risk students face the biggest obstacles in providing an education that will allow students to pass standardized assessments. Still, some

schools with large at-risk populations do manage to pass these high-stakes tests. Byrd-Blake, Afolayan, Hunt, Fabunmi, Pryor, and Leander (2010) assert student achievement on standardized tests is guided by their teachers' attitude toward high-stakes testing. This implies that more at-risk students will pass standardized tests if their teachers develop an optimistic, "can-do" attitude towards the test.

## **1.2 Purpose Statement**

This thesis seeks to evaluate the assertion of Byrd-Blake et al. (2010) that student achievement on standardized tests is greatly influenced by teachers' attitudes towards the test, looking to see if teachers in at-risk schools are capable of maintaining a positive attitude about the test and if that positive attitude can overcome the educational obstacles at-risk students face. This thesis is a case study of a nationally recognized "Breakthrough School" and its perceptions of the eighth grade Nebraska State Writing Assessment (NESA-W). As a recipient of the Breakthrough School award, the school was one of ten in 2014 recognized by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP). The award "showcases middle level and high schools that serve large numbers of students living in poverty and are high achieving or dramatically improving student achievement" (NASSP, 2015). This thesis seeks to define and explain the strategies in place that allow the school's at-risk population to exceed statistical norms by consistently passing, and even beating, state averages on the eighth grade NESA-W, a rigorous test that requires students to write a descriptive essay. Additionally, this thesis explores the attitudes of teachers, administrators, students, and their parents towards the test in attempt to understand the relationship between valuing the test and passing the test. This study

describes the curriculum and pedagogy used to prepare students to take the Nebraska State Writing Assessment at the school. It also studies the attitudes and philosophies guiding the pedagogy to define what it takes structurally, psychologically, and ethically for one at-risk middle school to successfully confront the reality of high-stakes writing tests in Nebraska.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

- A) What strategies does the at-risk school utilize to enable its students to exceed the Nebraska average on the NESAW?
- B) What attitudes do the school's staff, students, and their parents hold concerning the NESAW?

### **1.4 Research Design**

A semi-structured, open-ended survey was used to gain data from staff including five English teachers, the school's principal, and the district's curriculum developer. This method allowed for flexible explanation of policies, curriculum, testing philosophies, and morale as they relate to the NESAW. A quantitative measure would not fully encompass the staff's perceptions and opinions, though some interview questions did include scaled responses. The interviews were analyzed to find emerging themes and sub-themes. In addition, student perceptions surrounding the NESAW were measured through a more limited, three question specific survey in order to find trends among the larger population. All willing parents of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students also answered a modified version of the three-question survey to better understand their perceptions of the NESAW.

## 1.5 Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined as they relate specifically to this study to ensure the reader is able to fully understand the research being presented.

### **At-Risk:**

According to the Glossary of Educational Reform created by the Great Schools Partnership, “The term **at-risk** is often used to describe students or groups of students who are considered to have a higher probability of failing academically or dropping out of school.” However, defining the specific risks that lead to higher probability of failing is difficult given that “at-risk” is a term that “can encompass so many possible characteristics and conditions that the term, and if left undefined, could be rendered effectively meaningless” (Glossary of Educational Reform, At-Risk section). Therefore, the specific factors used to define “at-risk” students in this study are limited to four clearly defined categories: students who receive specialized academic services (special education), economically disadvantaged students (defined as students who qualify for free or reduced lunch), racial minorities, and English language learners (ELLs).

### **High-Stakes Tests**

The Glossary of Educational Reform defines high-stakes tests as tests used to evaluate “students, educators, schools, or districts, most commonly for the purpose of accountability—i.e., the attempt by federal, state, or local government

agencies and school administrators to ensure that students are enrolled in effective schools and being taught by effective teachers” (Glossary of Educational Reform, High-Stakes section). This study defines the 8<sup>th</sup> grade Nebraska State Writing Assessment (NESA-W) as a high-stakes test under the above definition.

### **Breakthrough School**

The National Association of Secondary School Principals annually awards a handful of secondary schools throughout the United States which illustrate “high poverty doesn’t have to mean low achievement, but that with the right leadership, sufficient time and a clear focus, urban, rural and suburban high-poverty schools can make great strides in academic achievement and overall school success” (Hailey, 2015, p.1).

### **Special Education**

The Encyclopedia of Children’s Health (2015) defines special education: “Special education refers to a range of educational and social services provided by the public school system and other educational institutions to individuals with disabilities who are between three and 21 years of age” (p.1). This research considers special education students as only students who meet legal qualification guidelines for an “individual education plan” (IEP) based on documented academic or behavioral needs.

## **1.6 Significance of the Study**

The findings of this study are valuable because they expand on the well-established research surrounding high-stakes testing, a weighty topic in educational research. The NESAW is currently facing scrutiny in Nebraska, making it a central focus for the Nebraska Department of Education. With the repeal of NCLB and the notoriety of Common Core, many states are changing their high-stakes writing tests. Nebraska is included among those states that are considering a significant change. Furthermore, whereas research surrounding standardized testing is readily available, this study is uniquely positioned in that it is the only formal study looking at this particular school. Understanding the strategies in place at the school, as well as the opinions of its staff, students, and their parents allows for insight into one at-risk school's above average performance on the NESAW.

## *Chapter 2—Understanding the NESAW*

### **2.1 History and Current Realities of Standardized Testing**

Federal initiatives to promote standardized testing are not a new idea. In 1965, President Lyndon Baines Johnson first signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) into law, expanding opportunities for students living in low-income areas through federal grants (Brenchly, 2015). In 2002, ESEA was reactivated when President George W. Bush signed the “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) Act (United States Department of Education, 2015). One of the original purposes for passing ESEA was “to provide money to help low-income students,” a purpose that closely mirrors a major objective of NCLB (NCLB Timeline, 2006, p.10). NCLB’s accountability standard required statewide testing of academic growth in the form of standardized testing. ESEA first required such testing in 1988, and by 1994 schools that did not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) were being identified.

In 1991, George H.W. Bush introduced America 2000, a program that, among other objectives, sought to establish national achievement standards, develop voluntary national achievement testing, and require “report cards” as the achievement measurement of individual schools and districts. Although America 2000 was never signed into law, it introduced the idea of national testing and teacher accountability to policymakers in the U.S. Congress (NCLB Timeline, 2006, p.10). As America 2000 passed through debates and revisions in both houses of Congress, Republicans expressed their concern that expanding the federal government’s role in education would suppress state and municipal rights. A common concern among Democrats was that standardized testing would



confirm what they already knew, that at-risk students were achieving at lower rates, and standardized testing would fail to solve the problem (Nelson & Weinbaum, 2009, p. 58).

In June of 1991, shortly after George H.W. Bush announced America 2000, Congress passed the Education Council Act creating the National Council on Education Standards and Testing (NCEST). Congress gave NCEST \$1,000,000 with the express purpose of providing “advice on the desirability and feasibility of national standards and testing in education” (Education Council Act, §402). The Council was ordered to produce a report with their findings by the end of the calendar year and to evaluate the President’s proposal to institute standardized testing in grades 4, 8, and 12 in English and other core subjects. The Committee’s report titled “Raising Standards for American Education” (1992) concluded that without defining national standards for “how good is good enough,” the “United States has gravitated toward de facto national minimum expectations... with focus on low-level reading and arithmetic skills” (p.75). The committee determined the proposed testing could be used for high-stakes purposes, such as employment screening and high school graduation requirements. Additionally, the committee determined that states and localities could use the tests for school accountability purposes. The report contained three specific recommendations for ensuring that at-risk students would be held to high standards including:

1. Schools should not divert students with poor initial performance into less demanding courses with lower expectations, but rather must redouble efforts and improve instruction.

2. Policymakers should seek to ensure that schools provide all students with opportunities to master the standard's demanding new material in an atmosphere where achievement is prized.

3. Schools should provide students with disabilities or limited English proficiency opportunities to learn and demonstrate their mastery of material under circumstances that take into account their special needs.

(NCEST, 1992, p.16)

While Congress failed to enact significant educational reforms during George H.W. Bush's presidency, America 2000 and NCEST started a conversation amongst U.S. policy makers and outlined a potential framework for standardized testing for the future. In 1994, Goals 2000, which was essentially a reworked version of America 2000, passed through Congress (Nelson & Weinbaum, 2009, p. 65). In Goals 2000, as with America 2000, Congress made a point of stating that nothing in the Act should be interpreted so as to subjugate state and local authorities under federal control. Congress made clear that its goal was to empower and fund the States to develop their own programs and policies. In fact the word "voluntary" was used at least seventy times in the Act. Goals 2000 authorized a commission to establish national standards for student achievement, opportunities to learn, and assessments before a school or district would be eligible to receive federal grant money. Goals 2000 succeeded in establishing national student achievement standards and required that the standards work to promote diversity in education. By June of 1995, 48 states mandated that schools submit plans compatible with Goals 2000 to the federal government in hopes of earning some of the program's \$400 million in federal funds (Smith, 1995, p.21). While the majority of school funding

still came from state and local sources, federal funds were often used to prop up lower income schools and to fund programs for special education and ELL students.

In 2001, George W. Bush took federal oversight a step further by signing No Child Left Behind. Like American 2000 and Goals 2000, NCLB sought to improve education generally, and specifically to improve outcomes for at-risk populations. Smith, J.M., & Kovacs P.E. (2010) claim the NCLB reform was “one of the most important pieces of legislation ever to be enacted... its goals are both ambitious and controversial, and the debate over its effectiveness is far from over” (p. 221). While the United States Department of Education (2015) asserts that NCLB ensures accountability for the growth of every student, what truly separated NCLB from its previous efforts is the fact that NCLB included explicit methods for gathering data (standardized test scores), ranking schools, and imposing consequences for the schools that did not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) (Smith & Kovacs, 2010). NCLB accountability ushered in the current era of high-stakes standardized testing as a means of evaluating and ranking schools. Unsurprisingly, NCLB’s AYP standard “exposed achievement gaps among traditionally underserved and vulnerable students” (NAASP, 2016, para. 4). For instance, the AYP standard showed that middle and upper class students are consistently more successful on standardized testing than special education students, English language learners, and racial minorities (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2015). Essentially, NCLB was unique in that went beyond passive recommendations and of its predecessors; it required schools to make progress on the goals or face consequences.

NESA’s accountability standard required that schools give all students at select grade levels standardized assessments in order to receive federal funding. However, the

program still afforded individual states the ability to develop their own standards. In 2000, the state of Nebraska first required students to submit to standardized testing in various subjects. Nebraska created the STARS (School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System) to comply with NCLB's data collection accountability standard. Unlike every other state, the Nebraskan STARS system allowed individual school districts to create their own assessments instead of administering the exact same test (NDE, 2010). Eventually, Nebraska joined the rest of the country by creating statewide tests. In 2008, Legislative Bill 1157 passed, replacing the STARS system of locally developed assessments with identical statewide tests in reading, math, and science (NDE, 2010). The NESAW had not yet been conceived.

Because all districts across the country were taking similar tests, a set of common standards, now known as the Common Core, was introduced to prepare students for testing. According to the 2015 Common Core State Standards Initiative, Common Core created a "clear set of shared goals and expectations for what knowledge and skills will help our students succeed" (p.4). Although the federal government did not require school districts to adopt Common Core, 43 states initially adopted the standards. The initiative dispelled the myth that Common Core standards are implemented through NCLB and are, therefore, directed by the federal government. Still, Common Core certainly does seem to echo NCLB's aim of accountability through standardization. With *Race to the Top*, President Obama provided financial incentive to adopt Common Core by providing federal grants totaling \$4.35 billion dollars (Thompson, 2014). In order to be awarded this federal funding, states were required to show evidence of their work "toward a

system of common academic standards” — essentially, though not in name, the Common Core (Thompson, 2014, p.1).

While Nebraska remains one of few states to reject the Common Core, Nebraska schools are still required to meet NCLB’s accountability standard that was recently modified by The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) under the authority of President Obama. The ESSA, according to the United States Department of Education (2015) ideally “Advances equity by upholding critical protections for America's disadvantaged and high-need students.” As a result of NCLB the subsequent ESSA, students in grades 3, 8, and 11 take a yearly reading and mathematics test, and students in grades 5, 8 and 11 take the NESa test in science. Additionally, Nebraska currently requires a writing test in grades 4, 8, and 11, in which 4<sup>th</sup> graders write a narrative essay, 8<sup>th</sup> graders write a descriptive essay, and 11<sup>th</sup> graders write a persuasive essay. Assessments typically take place during the spring semester.

From a practical standpoint, schools with a larger percentage of students living in poverty have a greater stake in federal funding. According to the U.S. Dept. of Education’s 2009 report, the poorest quarter of all schools receive on average half of all Title I dollars. Title I is the largest category of federal funding under ESEA with funding of approximately 12 billion dollars in 2005 (p.19). The extra funding is necessary to help poorer districts approach the funding levels of richer districts that receive greater local contributions. In 2004-2005, the poorest quarter of all schools received on average \$1,449 per student from the federal government compared to \$388 per student in the wealthiest quarter of all schools (p.15). Students in most need of federal funding clearly have the biggest stake in standardized assessments.

In summary, federal initiatives to promote standardized testing have steadily increased since President Johnson first passed the ESEA. The federal government has promoted standardized testing as a way to increase accountability among teaching professionals and a means to ensure quality education for lower income, special education, ELL, and minority students. School districts, including ones in Nebraska, rely on federal funds to supplement state and local budgets and have thereby established high-stakes assessments with broad reaching implications for everyone involved in public school education.

## **2.2 Nebraska Testing Philosophy**

NESA writing tests, like all other NESA tests, are designed to align with the Nebraska Department of Education's State Standards. These standards are meant to provide a framework for individual subject areas. All school districts in Nebraska are required to teach the state standards and to create and implement district level standards. NESA tests are tailored to meet the requirements of both state and federal legislation. Schools are then tasked with ensuring that each student meets or exceeds each state and each district standard and score accordingly on standardized tests.

Nebraska's standardized tests are used to rank and identify schools that need improvement using the 'Nebraska Performance Accountability System' (NePAS). The NePAS recorded standardized testing data through 2013. However, in 2014, NePAS was replaced with 'Accountability for a Quality Education System Today and Tomorrow'

(AQuESTT). The official AQuESTT website (2015) explains that shift from NePAS to AQuESTT is the result of Nebraskan legislation in 2014 which required a new method for evaluating schools' effectiveness. Whereas NePAS ranked schools and districts only by NESA scores and graduation rates, the new AQuESTT system integrates additional performance measures including "school and district accreditation, college and career ready education, and the effective use of data into a system of school improvement and support" (AQuESTT, 2015). While utilizing additional metrics to rate schools as "excellent," "great," "good," and "needs improvement" would appear to change the stakes of NESA tests, "assessment" is still the largest category on the "AQuESTT Classification Report." AQuESTT measures assessment improvement, assessment growth, non-proficient students, participation in standardized tests, and evidence based analysis adjustment (AQuESTT, 2015). The assessment section of the "AQuESTT Classification Report" includes five scores, the transitions category includes two scores, and all other sections are measured by a single score (AQuESTT, 2015).

### **2.3 Special Considerations Available for Students with Disabilities**

The 1997 and 2004 reauthorizations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) require all students with disabilities to engage in statewide accountability systems including standardized testing. The Nebraska Department of Education explained in its 2015 handout for parents of students with disabilities that "the reauthorization of Title I legislation (Public Law, 107-110), and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, further reinforces the need to include all students in accountability systems." The handout goes on to explain that under NCLB in Nebraska, all special education students must not

only take standardized tests but become proficient on those tests by 2014; literally no child in Nebraska was to be left unable to pass the standardized assessments.

Unsurprisingly, that seemingly impossible goal was not reached.

Though law requires that special education students take standardized assessments, those students are provided with appropriate and necessary accommodations for the NESa test. Nebraska schools form Individual Education Plans (IEPs) that include any accommodations a student might require for both traditional and standardized testing. Special education teachers create and maintain the IEPs, and also reevaluate them at least once every year. The Nebraska Department of Education requires that special education teachers fully rationalize their IEP testing accommodation decisions and encourages teachers to follow the “Decision Making Guidelines” found on their website. Examples of 2015 accommodations include the “use of a braille device,” “test administrator provides distraction-free space or alternate, supervised location for student,” and “test administrator pronounces individual words in directions or test items upon student request.” The 2015-2016 test allowed students to use a “speak-to-text tool” where teachers set up students with an appropriate device, such as the free Google Doc speak-to-text option. Students can speak, rather than type, their essay, though this technology is not always completely accurate. The state predicts that speak-to-text technology will soon become available within the testing site (NDE, 2015).

Additionally, an “Alternate Assessment” is provided for students who have disabilities that make taking the traditional NESa impossible or highly impractical even with accommodations (NDE, 2015). The following are the approved reasons for giving a



Nebraskan student an alternative assessment according to the 2015 IEP Team “Decision Making Guidelines” as found on the Nebraska Department of Education’s website:

1. Student possesses significant limitations, both in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior, expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills.
2. Student requires extensive, pervasive, and frequent supports in order to acquire, maintain, and demonstrate performance of knowledge and skills.
3. Student demonstrates cognitive ability and adaptive behavior that prevents completion of general academic curriculum, even with extensive modifications and accommodations.
4. Student may have an accompanying communication, motor, sensory, or other disability.

(NDE, 2015, p.1).

Generally, special education students who are able to function within general education classrooms with support from a special education teacher and an IEP do not meet the qualifications for an alternative assessment. Rather, the alternate assessments are for students with truly do not have the ability to take a standardized test even with accommodations.

## **2.4 NESAWriting and Technology**

In 2010, the Nebraska Department of Education chose Data Recognition Corporation (DRC) as the computerized information system used to administer the NeSA-W (NDE Technical Report, 2015). NESAW tests are generally given online using this system; although, a student can take the test on paper if their individual education plan so provides. During the 2014-2015 school year, a mere 453 eighth grade students

took the test with paper and pencil as allowed by their IEP while 21,433 eighth grade students took the test online (NDE Technical Report, 2015). Students taking online tests must do so between January 19<sup>th</sup> and February 6 on secure Chromebooks, secure iPads that support iOS 7.1 or higher, or secure Windows 8.1 computers or tablets (non-touch) (NDE Technical Report, 2015). Those who take the test online are allowed to use paper to pre-write. Principals are required to sign “The Test Security Agreement” thereby promising to handle testing materials securely and to utilize security measures to discourage cheating.

The Nebraska Department of Education recommends that districts give students 90 minutes to complete the test, but also notes that the test is not timed and schools should give students as much time as necessary to complete the test (NDE Technical Report, 2015). The 2015 Technical Report found on the Nebraska Department of Education’s website provides the chart shown on the following page which shows how long eighth grade students took to complete the test in 2015.

Time Span in Minutes	Student Count	% in Each Time Span
0-10	86	0.40
10-20	146	0.68
20-30	360	1.68
30-40	803	3.75
40-50	1573	7.34
50-60	2314	10.80
60-70	2749	12.83
70-80	2840	13.25
80-90	2342	10.93
90+	8220	38.35
Total	21433	100.00

While the Department suggests a 90-minute testing window, more than one third of students needed more time to complete the test. In fact, students who needed more than 90 minutes to take the test represent the largest group of test takers, beating the next largest group by over twenty-five percent.

Once the tests are completed, they are submitted electronically for scoring. However, this process has not been 100% effective. For instance, a 2016 press release from the Nebraska Department of Education stated that in 2012-2013, “the reliability of writing test scores at grades 8 and 11 was considered suspect...those scores were interpreted with caution because of technology problems” (p.2). The 2016 press release went on to state, “DRC assured the State Board of Education that the firm would take additional measures to assure no other problems would occur” (p.2). However, additional significant technical problems did occur and the state did not report the 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade writing test scores for the 2013-2014 school year. According to the 2015 NDE Interpretive Guide, a significant number of students experienced problems with NESA technology during the test. Additionally, this year’s test (2015-2016) had problems as well. The 2016 press release explained:

On Jan. 21, 325 students from 18 schools in six districts were affected during a 1 hour 47 minute partial state outage. On Jan. 27, at least 1,488 students from 112 schools in 85 districts were affected by a statewide outage. And, on Jan. 28, about 5,340 students at 207 schools from 143 districts lost access to testing tools for 4 hours and 7 minutes (p.1).

Valorie Foy, State Assessment Director, believes that even though students’ writing was not deleted or otherwise altered by the loss of access to the test, students who experienced

the problem likely became stressed, and this may have affected their writing. In fact, the 2016 press release boldly states, “Reoccurring problems with online state testing coupled with state and federal changes have prompted the Nebraska State Board of Education to look for a new direction in state testing” (p.2). The passage of ESSA, along with serious technology problems may mean the end of the NESA writing in its current form.

## **2.5 Scoring Accuracy**

Questions regarding NESA-W scoring validity are routinely raised, and NDE agreed that, scoring validity had been compromised due to technology problems (NDE Press Release, 2016). However, critics of the NESA-W tests believe that scoring accuracy has been compromised in additional ways unrelated to technology failures. In their article, “Thow’em Out or Make ‘em Better? State and District High-stakes Writing Assessments,” Graham, Herbert, and Harris (2011) explain that the validity of a writing test is contingent on the following assumptions: “different raters will provide the same score, the score obtained today would be attained a few days later, and a similar assessment produces similar results” (p.4). In their meta-analysis of studies examining those assumptions, it was found that analytic scoring (the type of scoring used on NESA-W tests) was reliable in less than half of the studies. They contend that the findings of their meta-analysis “raise serious concerns about the validity and use of current high-stakes writing assessments...especially given the consequences for students, teachers, and schools (Graham et al., 2011, p.10). Though the NESA-W does require a third reader when the two scorers substantially disagree, it is easy to imagine that that human error/natural variation would affect the essay scoring.

Variation not only exists in the individual graders, but also variation exists between states that employ different grading methods. Because of this, NESAW state averages may also provide misleading data to the federal government. Graham et al. claims that the highest predictor of student scores on high-stakes writing assessments is “student place of residence” because of “the variability in student’s passing rates from one state to the next on high-stakes writing assessments” (2011, p.7). In fact, proficiency ranges from as low as 24% to as high as 94% depending on which state is scoring the writing (Graham et al., 2011, p.7). There exists little consistency between states on test structure and scoring. Overall, NESAW scores are not completely reliable data.

## **2.6 Scoring Rubric and Process**

The test is scored using an analytic rubric with four weighted domains: ideas/content (35%), organization (25%), voice/word choice (20%), and sentence fluency/conventions (20%). Students can earn a 1, 2, 3, or 4 on each domain with four being the best score in each category. A copy of the scoring rubric can be found in Appendix K of this paper. Data Recognition Corporation (DRC) Performance Assessment Services (PAS) is responsible for reviewing all essays and arranging them into groups that illustrate the range of different scores available for each of the four domains (NDE Technical Report, 2015). Copies of these groups are then sent to the “rangefinding” committees. Rangefinding committees include ten to twelve Nebraskan educators, a Nebraska Department of Education representative, and two DRC representatives. The rangefinding groups are responsible for consensus scoring, a process of reading essays aloud and coming to an agreement on rubric scores for 120 of the essays selected by the Performance Assessment Services (Technical Report, 2015). Once

the rangefinding committee agrees on the range of writing proficiency each score on the rubric should encompass, DRC's PAS staff creates the response sets for training readers to use. The essays the rangefinding committee selected as representing each of the different scores are annotated and then used as anchor papers, papers that serve as clear examples of each score. The Department of Education (2015) states on their website, "The full range of each score point in each domain was clearly represented and annotated in the Scoring Guide." The Scoring Guide is then used to train readers.

The primary requirement to be a test reader is previous experience. The 2015 Department of Education Technical Report explains that each reader in 2015 had at least one year of experience scoring standardized writing tests. Readers must also have qualified on at least one of the training tests, called "qualifying sets," by scoring the test within an acceptable deviation from the true scores. Readers who failed to achieve 70% exact agreement on the first qualifying set were given additional, individual training. Readers who did not perform at the required level of agreement by the end of the qualifying process were not allowed to score any student responses. The 2016 Technical Report from Nebraska Department of Education states that 46 people were qualified to be readers. Those individuals underwent additional training using live tests.

After readers completed a two-day training process and could apply the rubric accurately, the actual scoring took place. During scoring, all readers were subjected to a "quality control process" where pre-scored "validity" papers were intermittently given to readers to ensure that they continue to score the essays according to state expectations. Also, "recalibration tests" were administered twice during scoring to emphasize scoring standards. Furthermore, team leaders, individuals identified as the most experienced

scorers, monitored through “read-behinds” to provide oversight to readers. Lastly, “numerous quality control reports were produced on demand or run daily” with the “Reader Monitor Report” and “Score Point Distribution Report” being particularly helpful in analyzing scoring data and maintaining high standards of scoring quality” (Technical Report, 2012).

## **2.7 Earmarks of Descriptive Writing**

Descriptive writing, required for the eighth grade NESAW, is a genre with a specific purpose. Typically, descriptive writing is full of sensory details that should help the reader imagine not simply what a person, place, or thing looks like but also to describe the smells, tastes, sounds, textures, and emotions that the writer associates with the topic. The Department of Education’s “Characteristics of the Mode- Descriptive” describes the four purposes of descriptive writing on their 2015 website:

- Portrays people, places, or things with vivid details to help the reader create a mental picture of what is being described
- Involves the reader so that he or she can visualize what or who is being described
- Creates or conveys a dominant impression of what is being described through sensory details
- Can be objective or subjective

“Characteristics of the Mode- Descriptive” also explains that descriptive essays must be organized into a beginning, middle, and end and explains the typical characteristics of each section. Thus, simply writing a cohesive, well-organized essay is not enough to



succeed on the 8th grade Nebraska State Writing Assessment. Rather, students need to show mastery of the descriptive genre.

## **2.8 Who is Passing?**

NESA-W scores over the past five years clearly show that Nebraska students have never approached the original 100% proficiency goal set by “No Child Left Behind.” However, Nebraska students have made progress towards that goal. According the NDE’s 2015 “Report Card,” an annual summary of NESA scores, the eighth grade writing scores in Nebraska have been steadily rising by a couple percentage points each year. Nebraska eighth graders were, on average, 64% proficient in 2011-2012, 67% proficient in 2012-2013, and 71% proficient in 2014-2015; scores were not reported in 2013-2014 due to technical difficulties with the test. More than 99.5% of Nebraskan students in public schools take this test (NDE Report Card, 2015).

The Nebraska Department of Education’s 2015 “Report Card” also reported NESA scores by subgroups. One such subgroup was “special education.” Between 14-16% of Nebraska students qualified for special education services throughout the 2010-2015 school years. Another subgroup is titled “students who qualify for free and reduced lunch” which is based on family income. The report card shows that the total percent of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch had increased around one percentage point almost every year since 2011. In the 2014-2015 school year, 44.17% of public school students in Nebraska qualified for free or reduced lunch rates. The following chart depicts the 2015 Report Card’s race/ethnicity groups of Nebraska NESA takers. The chart shows

all Nebraskan public school students; it is not limited to eighth grade students taking the NESAW.

Years	American Indian/Alaska Native	Asian	Black or African American	Hispanic	Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	White	Two or More Races
2010-2011	4,395	6,000	19,893	47,836	339	211,097	8,613
2011-2012	4,379	6,262	20,176	49,331	354	211,122	9,197
2012-2013	4,314	6,621	20,169	51,017	354	211,045	9,722
2013-2014	4,369	7,099	20,465	53,254	378	211,747	10,086
2014-2015	4,440	7,579	20,932	55,403	402	212,964	10,561

In 2015, “white” was the largest race or ethnicity representing 68.2% of all NESAW test takers. The following graph shows Nebraska 8<sup>th</sup> grade students and the percent who received passing scores on the NESAW by race/ethnicity according to NDE’s 2015 Report Card. The graph has been organized to show the groups in ascending order from most to fewest proficient results. Of note, American Indian/Alaska Native and Black/African Americans achieved equivalent results.

	% Below Proficient	% Proficient
All students (ALL)	29%	71 %
White	22 %	78%
Two or More Races (MU)	33%	67%
Asian	26%	66%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (PI)	38%	63%
Hispanic (HI)	43%	57%
American Indian/Alaska Native (AM)	53%	47%

Black or African American	53%	47%
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The Nebraska Department of Education’s Report Card also states that since 2011, 6% of Nebraskan students are classified as English Language Learners. This number has been fairly stable since 2011. English Language Learners passed the 2014-2015 NESAW at a rate of only 36%. With 64% of ELL students scoring below “proficient” on the test, ELL students are still surpassing special education students by 5%. Special education students are 31% proficient, meaning a whopping 69% did not pass the test in 2014-2015, even with accommodations. Lastly, 57% of students who are eligible for free and reduced lunch were proficient on the eighth grade NESAW. In other words, poorer students, as defined as a subset by their free or reduced lunch status, are 10% more successful than American Indian/Alaska Native and Black/African American students. Racial minorities, ELL students, special education students, and low-income students are clearly less proficient in the NESAW than their white, native English speaking, regular education, higher income peers.

## **2.9 What is at Stake?**

At first glance, the stakes for standardized testing in Nebraska appears to have settled with the December 10, 2015, passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act which, theoretically, created flexibility from NCLB’s rigid standards. The Nebraska Department of Education issued a position statement in 2015 which states that ESSA “moves away from NCLB’s one-size-fits-all accountability system and ensures that states, at a minimum, undertake reforms in their lowest performing schools, in high schools with high dropout rates, and in schools where subgroups are falling behind.” The U.S.

Department of Education asserts that NCLB had unrealistic achievement standards mandated by the federal government and the ESSA will increase flexibility for the states.

While ESSA seeks to move away from unrealistic proficiency requirements on federally mandated assessments, according to Assistant U.S. Secretary of Education Deborah S. Delisle, state assessments will remain a significant factor in measuring student growth (Burnette, 2016). Moreover, teacher and principal evaluations will be substantially based upon data demonstrating student's growth over time. Under ESSA, teacher and principal evaluations will be based upon how well their students do on state level standardized tests. Also, ESSA's flexibility from the strict NCLB standards is not automatic; states are required to submit flexibility plans to the Department of Education for approval. To date every state apart from Nebraska, California, Montana, and North Dakota have submitted their state flexibility plan to the Department of Education. Only Iowa and Wyoming have submitted plans and are still awaiting approval (U.S. Dept. of Education [DOE] ESSA Flexibility, 2016).

Below is an example of a teacher and principal evaluation plan which complies with ESSA:

Fall 2014– Spring 2015	School year (SY) 2014–2015 observations
Spring 2015	SY 2014–2015 State assessments
Summer 2015	Teachers receive ratings based on SY 2014–2015 performance, including, as a significant factor, data on student growth for all students and other measures of professional practice
Fall 2015	Teachers develop improvement plans based on SY 2014–2015 ratings
Fall 2015– Spring 2016	Teachers receive professional development based on SY 2014–2015

	ratings;  SY 2015–2016 observations
Spring 2016	SY 2015–2016 State assessments
Summer 2016	Teachers receive ratings based on SY 2015–2016 performance, including, as a significant factor, data on student growth for all students and other measures of professional practice
Fall 2016	Teachers develop improvement plans based on SY 2015–2016 ratings
Fall 2016– Spring 2017	Teachers receive professional development based on SY 2015–2016 ratings
Winter– Spring 2017	Personnel decisions, including advancement, termination, salaries, and bonuses, based on SY 2015–2016 ratings
Spring 2017	Hiring based on SY 2015–2016 ratings

(DOE, ESSA Flexibility/ Teacher and Principal Evaluation Flexibility Fact Sheet, 2016)

As with NCLB, the local educational agencies (LEA), or school districts are only eligible for federal funding if they demonstrate compliance with the federal law. Further, the lowest five percent of schools, determined primarily by standardized test scores and high school dropout rates, would be required to use “evidence based models” to support school wide interventions. Funding is provided to support the required interventions. If those schools do not improve, “the state is designated the responsibility of ensuring more rigorous strategies are put in place” (Executive Office of the President, 2016, p. 10). Furthermore, Nebraska public schools and districts are classified in one of four performance levels: excellent, great, good, and needs improvement. These classification levels as well as a list of low performing schools are made public once a school year, so the reputation of schools is at stake. Also at stake is school autonomy because Nebraska

schools that underperform on NESA tests and fall within the bottom three schools may be subject to unlimited state intervention.

### *Chapter 3- Literature Review*

#### **3.1 Impact of High-stakes Testing on Schools and Teachers**

The push to hold schools and teachers accountable for educational disparity through educational reform has been a consistent agenda throughout history. In 2002, with full support of congress and bipartisan approval, NCLB famously promised to solve the problem of ineffective schools and teachers with an accountability system largely reliant on standardized test scores. Parents were finally going to have access to objective data about their child's school, teachers were finally going to be held to rigorous standards, and failing schools would experience necessary change. Ultimately, NCLB did not live up to its lofty name. Three years after the passing of NCLB, Hursh (2005) wrote, "US [educational] reforms are increasing rather than decreasing inequality" (p.606). Fourteen years after its touted inception, NCLB would be repealed. Thomson and Cook (2013) attribute the American and international glorification of standardized testing as a means to blame educational failures and achievement disparities on schools and individual teachers. "The international effect has changed policy, these changes appear to have continued, albeit with increased intensity, the (disciplinary) focus on the teacher-as-problem for quality education" (Thomson & Cook, 2013, p.701). Thus, the standardized test represents an international shift of authority from teachers to tests and those who control such tests.

Accompanying this shift is the strain stemming from teachers' diminished power and the sacrifice of their professional identities and personal ethics (Thomson & Cook, 2013). Even though NCLB is legislation of the past, ESSA, its current replacement, still

utilizes standardized testing as a means of judging schools and teachers. The question remains, can standardized testing data reveal good and bad teaching? Is the shift in power from teachers towards national curriculums and high-stakes test makers based on an inaccurate notion that inept teachers are the source of educational inequality?

One outcome of standardized testing that does seem certain is the fact that it has increased turnover among teachers. Hill and Barth (2004) claim that the framers of NCLB, the original architects of high-stakes standardized testing in the United States, failed to predict how it would affect teacher retention, a historical problem affecting education. One third of new teachers leave the profession after three years, and half quit teaching altogether within five years (Hill & Barth 2004). While one of the core aims of national standardized testing was to help at-risk students, teachers who work with these students will very likely receive more negative test-based evaluations. The reality is standardized testing incentivizes teachers to abandon the at-risk students most in need of experienced professionals and condemns teachers and schools who serve students who are less likely to be successful on standardized tests.

Students, particularly at-risk students, are also suffering from what Gunzenhauser (2003) calls the “default” philosophy of education that comes from placing “inordinate value on the scores achieved on high-stakes tests, rather than on the achievement that the scores are meant to represent” (p.51). Overemphasis on test scores likely causes a narrowing of curriculum and, thereby, a reduction of teacher’s creative control. The word “standardized” is, after all, a natural opponent to words like creative, unique, and personal. Guzenhauser (2003) concludes, “It has become difficult for educators to discuss the value and purpose of education” (p.57). When teachers lose the desire or power to



compose their own philosophies of education and submit to the notion that what matters in education most is standardized test scores, the very nature of education changes. The progression of standardized testing, which took root in NCLB, is losing some hold in the sense that NCLB was recently repealed. However, the fact that standardization is arguably the main component of the new ESSA predicts a continued emphasis on high-stakes testing and a continued pressure on at-risk schools.

### **3.2 The Five-Paragraph Essay**

The NESAW essay test merely requires an introduction, body, and conclusion. The NESAW rubric does not specifically require a five-paragraph essay format to pass the test, but it is clear that a five-paragraph essay would certainly meet the test's requirements. Generally, a five-paragraph essay consists of an introduction with a hook, a preview of the main points the essay will cover, and a transition. Five-paragraph essays also include three body paragraphs that begin with topic sentences and end with transitions. Finally, these essays end with a conclusion where the thesis is restated and the three main points are reviewed. Many schools teach the five-paragraph essay format in hopes that students will use it to be successful in the NESAW tests. However, teachers and other academics that would like to encourage versatility and creativity among student writing often criticize the prescriptive five-paragraph format.

Nunes (2013) compiled a list of common complaints about the five-paragraph format.

- Its formulaic nature deters real thinking about writing structure.
- It lacks authenticity because it is a form professional writers never use.

- It deprives students of the opportunity to think critically about writing.
- It omits complex ideas that do not mesh with the structure.
- Teachers who teach this format indoctrinate student writing.
- Students fail to experience the stress associated with ownership.

NESA-W scorers, on the other hand, likely appreciate the five-paragraph format many students use because it includes the required components of the NESA-W and allows graders to more easily identify those elements.

Teachers and other academics defending the five-paragraph structure argue that students must be taught prescribed organization before they develop the autonomy to organize their own writing. Many elementary, middle, and special education teachers support the five-paragraph format believing teaching a structured writing formula makes longer writing accessible to all. Five-paragraph essays give students the tools they need to begin thinking about how to group ideas in a meaningful way (Nunes, 2013). Whether individual teachers appreciate the five-paragraph formula or find it oppressive, pressure to pass standardized tests almost certainly includes a pressure to teach the tried and true five-paragraph essay format.

### **3.3 Curriculum Narrowing**

Narrowing curriculum to focus on skills assessed in standardized tests seems like a natural response to the pressure of high-stakes testing. Schools with low scores on such tests will almost certainly want to make any changes they see as likely to improve scores. Even schools with passing scores may find themselves competing with other schools. The incentive to focus on tested content is all the more omnipresent when one considers that

not only is the school and district's reputation and autonomy at stake, but also that professional evaluations for superintendents, principals, and teachers. Berliner (2011) asserted the most notable finding of his research article, "Rational Responses to High-Stakes Testing: The Case of Curriculum Narrowing and the Harm that Follows," is "clear evidence that a great deal of curriculum deemed desirable for our schools by a broad spectrum of citizens is, instead, curtailed in high-stakes environments" (p.299). The decision of what to teach in schools is one of immense consequence for the nation as a whole.

Vogler (2002) studied the impact of publicly releasing standardized testing averages on school curriculum through a large scale research study and found that "[t]he use of state-mandated student performance assessments and the high-stakes attached to this type of testing program contributed to changes in teachers' instructional practices" (p.39) Lawrence et al. (2013) focused on the impact to writing curriculum and concluded that analytic writing assignments involving more than a few short sentences are rarely required by middle school teachers. Analytic writing, unlike creative writing, generally focuses on the analysis of a text. Although current middle school standardized tests generally do not require analytic writing, the NESA reading test will be introducing an analytic writing component for the 2016-2017 test. When the reading NESA changes, it is likely that schools will adjust curriculum to focus on the new skill.

Necessarily, to accommodate extra time spent on tested skills, educators need to take time away from other areas of study. Often, classes like art, music, and physical education are impacted most. West (2012) reports a 46% reduction in class time devoted to art and music due to changes in curriculum meant to provide more time for testable

math/reading skills. West (2012) also reports that 60% of music teachers he studied are required by their principal to devote class time to skills tested on standardized assessments. Teachers are also spending more of their professional development focusing on aligning curriculum to standardized tests. Smith and Kovacs (2011) found that teacher education has changed as a result of standardized testing; teachers who taught skills covered by standardized testing (reading, writing, and math) received more training than other teachers. Benko (2012) maintains focusing curriculum on standardized tests subject matter limits student freedom to engage in learning content they find enjoyable or engaging, making it difficult to maintain student interest in the mandated curriculum. Olinghouse, Zheng, & Morlock (2012) explain that students who are not interested in the writing genre or prompt may exhibit decreased motivation leading to “test error in a system designed to gather reliable and valid data” (p.98). If students are not giving their best effort on the test, it is impossible to know what skills they possess.

In his article, “Testing Resistance: Busno-Cratic Power, Standardized Tests, and Care of the Self (2005) Mayo details the difference between developing curriculum based on a test which he condemns as unethical verses aligning content to standards which he calls ethical. Mayo (2005) calls the sacrifice “well-intentioned” teachers make to teach “for the test” rather than teach “for knowledge” unethical. The pressure to act unethically promotes a resistance to standardized testing from educators that Mayo (2005) praises. Standardized testing has undoubtedly caused schools to reevaluate curriculum and make changes that support a greater emphasis on teaching to high-stakes tests.

### **3.4 Impact of Testing on Special Education Students**

The Americans with Disabilities Act and No Child Left Behind led to increased participation in standardized testing from special education students. Both laws aimed to hold schools accountable for providing quality education for special education students. In the 2004 article, “What We Know and Need to Know About the Consequences of High-Stakes Testing for Students with Disabilities,” Nelson and Ysseldyke argue their study clearly shows “raising expectations for students with disabilities can set off a continuous result” (pg. 91). Nelson and Ysseldyke (2004) contend that when students must be tested, they must be taught. Mandated testing may pressure schools to improve instruction by aligning curriculum. Lawmakers prominently cited this rationale ever since Bush first proposed America 2000. However, what some laud as ‘curricular alignment’ others may condemn as ‘narrowing of curriculum’ or ‘teaching to the test.’ The test-centric, mainstream curriculum is at odds with the teaching principle of differentiation. Special education students who take standardized assessments are accommodated; they receive supports such as scribing or reading questions aloud, but the test itself is not different from the test regular education students take. In some ways, holding all students to the same standard, special education and regular education alike, may indeed mean an increased focus on teaching special education students higher level content, but such content may not be the appropriate for every student. Taking curricular control away from special education teachers who understand the unique capabilities of each student and replacing it with a one-size-fits-all standardization drifts away from the individual education programs (IEP) special education students may require.

Scot et al. (2009) titled her research “Paint by Number Teachers and Cookie Cutter Students” and concluded that teachers cannot “honor the differing needs of all students” due to the unintended effects of high-stakes testing (pg. 40). Special education includes students who need academic differentiation either because they struggle or because they are gifted. Though the term special education is less frequently used to describe gifted students, high ability learners (HAL) make up an important part of special education. Standardized testing may limit curriculum to ‘testable’ skills that do not challenge HAL students and prevent students with disabilities from taking remedial courses that could provide the necessary background for a future vocation. While gifted students may become bored, students with disabilities may become overly stressed. Both boredom and stress can have a disastrous effect on learning and student perception of the value of school. An overemphasis on preparing all students to take standardized test leads to uniformity, a move away from tailoring curriculum to the unique needs of special education students. High-stakes testing makes education uniform when students, especially special education students, are not uniform at all.

### **3.5 Linguistic, Racial, and Socioeconomic Oppression**

Students who are English Language Learners (ELL) often live below the poverty line, and tend to score below average on standardized writing tests. For obvious reasons, ELL students face some of the greatest obstacles to passing standardized tests. According to the Department of Education’s 2015-2016 “Guide for Including and Accommodating English Language Learners (ELLs) in the Nebraska State Accountability (NeSA) Tests,” all ELL students, even those who recently arrived in the United States, must take the

NESA-W in grades four, eight, and eleven. Students who cannot write in English are allowed to write in their native language for up to three years after arriving to the United States. However, if students write in their native language, the test will be scored as a zero. The student will be counted as a participant, and the zero will not count towards the school's adequate yearly progress final score.

Escamilia et al. (2003) studied the impact of high-stakes writing testing on English Language Learners in Colorado where, like in Nebraska, ELL students are allowed to write in their native language for three years but will not receive a score. The study concluded, "results indicated that schools with large numbers of ELLs are negatively impacted on school report card ratings despite the three year exemption for ELLs" (pg. 46) Colorado has shown a pattern between schools with large numbers of ELLs and schools who receive low scores on school report cards. Escamilia et al. (2003) assert that the testing and reporting system in Colorado, which is nearly the same system Nebraska uses, is "designed to punish, rather than support, schools and school districts with large numbers of ELLs" (47). Accordingly, the study calls for a change in policy that would support, rather than "castigate," schools with many ELLs (47). Thus, rather than encouraging students of diverse backgrounds, standardized testing discourages linguistic diversity. Even Hispanic students who have lived in the United States their whole life and are not considered ELL score lower on high-stakes writing tests than their white peers.

NDA's 2015 Report Card also depicts NESA-W scores by race/ethnicity. White and Asian students are significantly more successful on the test than their black, Hispanic, biracial, and Native American/Alaskan peers. Additionally, students who

qualify for free or reduced lunch prices are less successful than their more affluent peers. Beckman et al. (2012) reports that long-term poverty has a significant impact on cognitive and academic achievement because learning is tied to prior learning opportunities and experience. Grant's 2004 article, "Oppression, Privilege, and High-Stakes Testing" explains that minority students and poor students are disproportionately likely to attend the lowest accredited schools. High-stakes testing is especially stressful for such schools. These schools are much more likely to be impacted by narrowing curriculum, poor teacher and administrator retention, high dropout rates, and a lack of resources.



## *Chapter 4—Methodology*

### **4.1 Rationale for a Qualitative Study**

Not all research surrounding education can be measured with numbers and understood through statistical analysis. Knowing that subjectivity is easily associated with bias, this study's research questions can still only be analyzed using qualitative measures. This research attempts to describe a school's culture. It seeks to understand how and why this school scores above average on the NESAW test despite student characteristics associated with lower test scores. Open-ended survey methodology and observation is the most effective way for this researcher to identify important questions and to put together a nuanced discussion of results. Causation cannot be determined from this study, as it does not test variables. Still, the qualitative case study is useful in that it provides insight into a complex reality. Public education is a multifaceted system functioning with constantly changing variables. Seventh grade NESAW scores are the result of numerous factors.

When a seventh grader writes a descriptive essay their fluency is the result of the entirety of their life experience. A list of factors affecting student performance on high-stakes standardized writing tests would be potentially unlimited. Everything from the conditions in the womb to the students' particular mood on the day of the exam could affect the test scores. Yet composite standardized test scores for an entire grade of students should reflect fundamental characteristics of a school. Such characteristics cannot be isolated and altered in response to research. A qualitative analysis of this

outlier school is an effective way to examine the relationship between standardized testing and its role in educating at-risk students at this particular school.

#### **4.2 Researcher Positioning**

This research fits into the category defined by Creswell (2013) as social constructivism or interpretivism. Social constructivism is the type of research people do to better understand the environment in which they work or live in order to subjectively define their lived experiences. As both the primary researcher in this case study and an English teacher at the school in question, I am uniquely positioned to deeply understand the school and have a concrete stake in understanding the research conclusions. My position as teacher gives me an in-depth understanding of the English curriculum, particularly in the grade I teach making me an ideal candidate for drawing conclusions regarding research question one: What are the strategies in place at the school that allow an at-risk population to defy the norm by consistently passing the NES-A-W? I relied on my own experience as a form of data for research question one. Specifically, I outlined the strategies used at the school including the district writing process, curriculum, grading norms, and lesson progression using my personal experience as a primary form of data. Furthermore, I used my experience teaching at the school to identify survey questions I suspected would reveal useful data about strategies used at the school. For example, I asked teachers to describe the district writing process because I knew that process is a central component of the school's NES-A-W preparation. I also asked teachers to describe their feelings on grading district and state essays because I knew the team of teachers had recently changed their grading patterns.

Four surveys were administered for this project: one for students, one for their parents, one for English teachers, and one for administrators. All surveys were anonymous. Only current eighth grade students were surveyed, and I teach seventh grade. Half of the current eighth graders had me as a teacher last year. While it is possible that some of the students felt inclined to hide their true thoughts about the NESA-W because they know me, the fact that surveys were anonymous and the fact that I am no longer their teacher and therefore have no direct power over their lives should mitigate that inclination. Similarly, it is possible that parents hid their true thoughts on the NESA-W because half of them know me as their child's seventh grade teacher. Again, survey anonymity was meant to promote honesty.

Teacher surveys were also anonymous. Teachers completed the survey and left in my school mailbox to ensure anonymity. However, I know the teachers well enough that true anonymity was not possible; teachers knew it was likely that I would likely be able to make educated guesses about who the completed each survey. It is possible that teachers felt hid their true feelings on the surveys because they know me, but it seems more likely that teachers were honest because they know me. I would know if they were being dishonest in many cases because we have talked about the issues before.

Administrator surveys were also anonymous, but because only two administrators were surveyed, the principal and curriculum developer, it would be reasonable to assume that I would be able to make an accurate educated guess about who completed which survey. Again, it is possible the administrators hid their true feelings on the surveys because they know me. Because I have discussed issues surrounding the NESA-W with administrators before, I would notice if they reported different ideas in the survey than they purport at

school meaning they administrators actually had a stake in being honest if the opinions they purport at school are genuine. All in all, the results of this study are heavily influenced by the fact that I am a teacher at the school in question. My experience working at the school was used as a form of data and informed the survey writing process. The conclusions drawn in regards to research question one fall heavily under the constructivist research category, and are therefore purposely subjective.

Research question two asks what attitudes the school's staff, students, and parents have concerning the NESA-W. The data collected for research question two is less informed by my personal experience teaching at the school. As a teacher with strong feelings about the utility of standardized writing testing, I decided not to include my own response to the survey as a part of my data. Because this is only my second year of teaching at the school, my opinions have not affected the NESA-W data at the school and did not help the school earn its "Breakthrough School" title. Results about teacher attitudes toward testing do not reflect my own opinions.

#### **4.3 Sampling**

Sampling is the selection of a group of individuals from a specific population to estimate characteristics of the whole population. This research does not use a sampling method. Rather than studying a select number of participants through random selection or some other sampling method, this study surveyed every willing member of the groups who the researcher identified as being directly involved in the NESA writing scores at the school in question: students, writing teachers, parents, and administrators. These groups were chosen because they are all participants in the phenomenon being studied.

#### 4.4 Participants

The following chart depicts the total numbers of participants.

Students	103
Parents	116
Teachers	5
Administrators	2

##### 4.4a Student Participants

All eighth grade students from the school in question were invited to take a three question, multiple-choice survey. Only eighth graders were surveyed because the NESAW is taken during eighth grade. Furthermore, eighth graders experienced the school's NESAW preparation process and are more knowledgeable than sixth and seventh graders about the test. The three questions ask how students feel about writing in general, how they feel about taking the NESAW, and about what score they expect to get on the NESAW. In order to prove that the students at the school are scoring higher on the NESAW than the Nebraskan average and would make good candidates to study, the following chart depicts scores from the school over the course of the last four years with the exception of 2014 as technology problems prevented the state from releasing scores that year.

NESAW % Students Meet or Exceed Standards 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Writing			
	School in Question	Nebraska Average	Difference
2012	79	63	16%
2013	79	66	13%

2014	n/a	n/a	n/a
2015	84	70	14%

The success is particularly noteworthy given the demographics at the school. The middle school has roughly 810 students enrolled. According to the Nebraska Department of Education, in 2015 613(76%) were white, 151(18.4%) were Hispanic, 16 (3%) were black, 13 (2%) were Asian or Pacific Islander, and five (4%) were Native American or Native Alaskan. 13(1.2%) reported identifying with two or more races. Fifty-seven percent of the students in the middle school receive free or reduced priced lunch. In addition, 5% of the students at Hastings Middle School placed in the English Language Learners program. Lastly, over 22% of the student body qualifies for special education services. The following chart compares the student population totals in Nebraska and at the school in question proving that the school does have significant numbers of at-risk students including an slightly above average number of Hispanic students and above average numbers of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch and Special Education.

	Nebraska	School in Question
White	69%	76%
Hispanic	17%	18%
Black	7%	3%
Asian or Pacific Islanders'	2%	2%
Native American or Alaskan	Less than 1%	Less than 1%
Two or More Races	3%	1%
English Language Learner	6%	5%

Free or Reduced Lunch	45%	57%
Special Education	16%	22%

This next chart compares NES-A scores from at-risk students with the Nebraska state averages for those subgroups proving the white students as well as students in at-risk categories are performing much higher than the state average. Scores for black, Asian or Pacific Islanders', Native American or Alaskan, two or more races, and English language learners were not reported from the school in question because the numbers were too small to draw any meaningful conclusions from the data.

	NESA-W Nebraska Averages	NESA-W School in Question Averages
White	78%	87 %
Hispanic	57%	76%
Free or Reduced Lunch	57%	79%
Special Education	31%	52%

Essentially, the student participants were chosen because they are part of an atypical school where eighth grade students, particularly at-risk students, are more successful on the NES-A-W than state averages would predict. Data about student feelings toward writing in general and towards the NES-A-W provides insight into the level of investment test takers have in passing the NES-A-W.

#### **4.4b Parent Participants**

All willing parents of current 8<sup>th</sup> grade students were surveyed with a three question, multiple-choice survey. The questions asked about how parents think their student feels about writing in general, how parents feel about their student taking the NESA-W, and what score parents expect their student to receive. Parents play an important role in their students' education. Parent attitudes toward the test are likely to affect student perceptions of the test. Parental support of school policies and belief in the importance of high-stakes tests can ultimately assist or hinder test scores making them an important part of the school's success and a useful source of data.

#### **4.4c Teacher Participants**

All current English teachers in the building are being surveyed except for me, the researcher. The teacher survey is longer than the student and parent surveys and required teachers to answer a combination of essay questions and ranking questions. The survey has four parts: basic information (teacher background and experience), teaching norms (description of curriculum and other test preparation strategies), response to testing controversies (teacher feelings about divisive aspects of the test), and overall opinions about the NESA-W. Teachers have the most control over the learning environment at the school. They create and implement the curriculum and set the tone for NESA-W discussions in the school.

#### **4.4d Administrator Participants**

The administrators surveyed for the study include the school principal and district's curriculum developer. These are the only two administrators directly



influencing NESAW preparation at the school. Like teachers, administrators answered a survey consisting of a combination of essay questions and ranking questions. The survey had the same four parts as the teacher survey: basic information, teaching norms, response to testing controversies, and overall opinions about the NESAW but the wording of questions was modified to apply to administrators.

#### **4.5 Institutional Review Board Approval**

The research conducted for this paper is approved under the University of Nebraska's Institutional Review Board and was classified as exempt on January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

##### **4.6a Data Collection Procedures for Students:**

All current eighth grade students at the school were invited to participate in the study. No student was allowed to participate unless they first got permission from their parent or guardian. Parents and guardians had to sign a consent form for their student; consent forms were available in English and Spanish. The participants were not old enough to sign their own consent forms but were required to sign an assent form if they agreed to voluntarily participate. Once both the parental consent form and the student assent were completed, students took a three question, multiple choice survey that asked about their feelings on writing in general, their feelings about the NESAW, and their feelings about whether or not they would pass the NESAW. The surveys were completed at school during English class and took less than five minutes. Students did not put their names on the surveys. The researcher administered surveys. Students were instructed to

place completed surveys facedown in a basket and reminded not to put their name on the surveys.

#### **4.6b Data Collection Procedures for Parents:**

Students brought home a consent form and a survey for parents. The survey asked parents about their child's feelings about writing, about the parents' feelings about the NESAW, and about what score they predicted their child would get on the NESAW. Parents could elect to sign the consent form and complete the survey or to choose not to participate. Surveys were anonymous. Students brought their parent's survey and consent form back to school and turned it into their English teacher.

#### **4.6c Data Collection Procedures for Teachers and Administrators:**

I explained my project to the five English teachers and two administrators in person at a meeting. Teachers and administrators were given a copy of the consent form and a copy of the survey. Teachers and administrators were instructed to read and sign the consent form if they wanted to participate. They each signed a consent form and were given a survey. The survey had four parts: basic information, teaching norms, response to testing controversies, and overall opinions about the NESAW. All teachers and administrators were instructed to leave the completed surveys in my mailbox and not to put their names on the surveys.

\*Copies of the student, parent, teacher, and administrator surveys can be found in the appendix of this paper.

#### **4.7 Data Analysis**

Coding was used to track each concept that emerged through the written teacher and administrator interviews. These interviews varied on length of response to each question. Resulting themes and subthemes from the coding process were recorded in an excel spreadsheet. Teacher and administrator response to numeric questions were tallied and averaged, as were student and parent responses to the multiple-choice survey.

#### **4.8 Ethical Considerations**

Because the participants in the study are my colleagues, my workplace superiors, my former students, and the parents of my former students, it was important to make sure the participants felt comfortable being honest in their survey responses. Participants were encouraged to feel safe refusing to answer questions if they felt uncomfortable for any reason. Students were told that their current English teachers would never find out about their individual responses. Informed consent was obtained before conducting this research and pseudonyms were used for all teachers and administrators who participated. Parents not only signed their own consent waivers but also signed waivers for their child. The students signed their own assent waiver and were not rewarded for participation. Participants were protected by reporting aggregate data from surveys and using pseudonyms when reporting qualitative data.

#### **4.9 Summary**

The research is defined as social constructivist or interpretivist because the researcher is seeking to understand her own work environment. Qualitative analysis

based on student, parent, teacher, and administrator survey responses is used to examine the reasons one middle school in Nebraska with significant portions of at-risk students is earning higher than average NESAW results. Students and their parents answered three question, multiple-choice surveys. Student and parent investment in the test is an important factor in NESAW success. Teachers and administrators answered a four-part survey that included a combination of essay and ranking questions. Teachers and administrators control curriculum and test preparation and play important roles in preparing students for the test and maintaining a culture of NESAW success at the school. Analyzing the resulting data from the four types of surveys provides a well-rounded look into the test preparation strategies used at the school and the attitudes informing those strategies.

## Chapter 5—*Results and Analysis*

### 5.0 Central Questions

Central questions provide a focus for “the generation of a theory in grounded theory” (Creswell, 2013, p. 143). There are two central questions in this study:

A) What **strategies** does the at-risk school utilize to enable its students to exceed the Nebraska average on the NESA-W?

B) What **attitudes** do the school’s staff, students, and parents hold about the NESA-W?

### 5.1 Sources of Information

Strategies employed by the school for NESA-W test preparation can be divided into two categories: prescriptive and discretionary. Prescriptive strategies as discussed in this paper are those required by the district or school administration and used consistently by all English teachers at the school. The information on prescriptive strategies was drawn from the two administrator’s open-ended surveys as well as the researcher’s own experience utilizing the strategies within her position as a seventh grade teacher at the school. This approach allows for a decisive depiction of the school’s patent strategies. To the extent that the teacher surveys discussed prescriptive strategies, that information is included as well. Because there is less variance in the prescriptive strategies from teacher to teacher, the risk of this researcher’s individual biases tainting the results is outweighed by the clarity achieved with a unified explanation.

Discretionary strategies as discussed in this paper range from unique approaches employed by one teacher at the school to strategies used by most teachers that were not required by the administration. The discretionary group also includes teacher's individual qualities such as years of teaching experience. The main sources of information on discretionary techniques in this paper are the five teacher surveys.

Student and parent surveys focused only on the second research question concerning attitudes towards the test. This researcher chose not to gather data on strategies for improving NESAW scores from parents and students because they are largely unaware of the rationale behind the strategies used at the school as they relate to the state test, and they were not involved in setting either prescriptive or discretionary strategies employed by the school. It is important, however, to consider the student and parent attitudes toward the NESAW to better understand how the strategies are affecting students and parents.

## **5.2 Coding**

Coding was used to develop themes and subthemes within the teacher and administrator surveys. Concepts are designated as themes if mentioned by three or more teachers, a combination of four or more teachers/administrators, or both administrators. Concepts are as designated sub-themes if mentioned by two teachers and/or administrators. The following is a list of all identified themes and subthemes used to inform the both the prescriptive and discretionary strategies. These themes and subthemes supplement researcher knowledge in explaining prescriptive strategies and are the sole basis for explaining discretionary strategies. Furthermore, the themes and subthemes were also used to answer research question two where applicable.

### **Commitment Themes:**

1. All teachers and administrators have significant experience.
2. All teachers and administrators expressed a commitment to tailoring lessons to meet the needs of individual students through differentiation.
3. The school is designed around the “middle school concept.”
4. All teachers and administrators reported feeling generally positive about the NESA-W preparation process put in place at their school.

### **Curriculum Themes:**

1. Write Tools, a trademarked writing curriculum, is reportedly used by all teachers except one.
2. All of the teachers, except one, reported using their own teacher-generated curriculum.
3. Three teachers reported using NESA writing samples.
4. Three teachers mentioned teaching grammar.
5. Four teachers reported that they would spend about the same amount of time teaching descriptive writing if given total curricular control; the fifth teacher would spend more time on descriptive writing than she does now.

### **Curriculum Sub-themes**

1. Two teachers use the NESA-W rubric as a major part of their curriculum.
2. Two teachers reported feeling pressure to “teach to the test.”
3. Two teachers called the descriptive genre required by the NESA-W ‘useless.’

**Essay Format Themes**

1. All of the teachers and one administrator believe their district and state graders are looking for a five-paragraph essay.
2. All teachers teach a five-paragraph essay.
3. Four of the five teachers have no problem with teaching the five-paragraph essay, and the other teacher finds it just slightly problematic.
4. All teachers think five-paragraph essays are a good format for students because the format teaches structure.
5. All teachers teach an introduction and conclusion format.
6. All teachers require students to include a thesis statement in their essay.
7. Four of the teachers mentioned teaching students to use a hook and preview in introduction.
8. Four teachers reported teaching students to use transition sentences between paragraphs and topic sentences at the start of paragraphs.
9. All teachers reported requiring numerous details in each body paragraph.
10. Four teachers stated they expect students to review the three body paragraphs in their conclusion.
11. Four teachers report having students end their essays with a final thought.

**Essay Format Sub-themes**

1. Two teachers mentioned asking students to restate their thesis in the conclusion of their essay.



**Grading Themes**

1. All five teachers reported double grading, having two teachers score district and state writing.
2. Four teachers and one administrator think grading accuracy on the NESa is a moderate problem.
3. Three of the five teachers expressed a belief that the grades are subjective and vary based on the individual doing the grading.

**Special Education Themes**

1. Four of the five teachers reported that special education students struggle with standardized writing tests.
2. Three teachers reported that the test affords HAL students with an opportunity to demonstrate their talents. Teachers used words including love, fly, shine, and dazzle to describe HAL students experience with the test.
3. Three teachers and both administrators feel the NESa-W challenges high ability learners to score in the 'exceeds' category.
4. Three teachers report an intimate knowledge of allowable accommodations for special education students and see a pattern of increasing restriction on the use of accommodations by the State of Nebraska as a serious barrier to their student's ability to achieve passing scores.

**Poverty Theme**

1. Three teachers and one administrator thought students who come from poverty may lack the background knowledge or experience needed for standardized writing tests.

### **5.3 Research Question 1- Strategies**

#### **Prescriptive Strategy 1: District Writing**

All teachers and administrators surveyed cited repeated NESAW practice testing as a key factor in the school's success. The target school requires that all of its students take a district mandated descriptive writing pretest in the fall and posttest in the spring in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. This means that students will take a simulated NESAW test under formal testing conditions five times before taking the actual state test. The simulated test prompt asks students to write a well-organized essay describing a person, place, or object. For example, the fall 2015 prompt asked students to write an essay describing their favorite season. The pretest in the fall uses state prompts given in previous years, while in the spring all grades use the actual NESAW prompt for the year. Sixth and seventh graders take the district test over the course of three days during their English class. Eighth grade students are given 90 consecutive minutes to take the test and all students' schedules are adapted on these days to allow them to finish the test in one sitting. All students who have IEP's are provided with accommodations including, but not limited to, scribing for both the district and state tests. To ensure that enough scribes are available, all English teachers in the building are required to give up their personal plan period on testing days and possibly their team meeting period to serve as scribes.

After the tests are submitted, each teacher uses the NESAW rubric to grade all of his or her own students' papers as well as 25 tests from their partner teacher's students. (A partner teacher is the other teacher in the building who teaches the same subject in the same grade). Because tests are graded twice to ensure scorer inter-reliability, it is important that teachers have all of their own papers and the additional 25

graded by the time they meet with every English teacher in the building for “grading day.” This full day event is held two weeks after the test. During grading day tests that have only been graded once are graded a second time by another English teacher in the building. Substitute teachers are brought in to teach the students on this day so that the English teachers can collaborate and discuss the tests in a conference room. The teachers themselves requested that all tests be double-graded. The two scores are then averaged and spring posttest scores are incorporated into the student's' grades while the fall pretest scores are only used for data collection and teacher development purposes. The actual spring 8<sup>th</sup> grade NESAW essays are scored four times, once by the student's teacher, once by another teacher at the student's school, and twice by the state.

### **Prescriptive Strategy 2- Middle School Concept**

The school is set up based on the middle school concept meaning teachers have one period a day in addition to their plan period to meet with the other subject teachers on their team. The middle school concept gives teachers significant time to contact parents, fix problems, and strategize ways to meet the needs of individual students. One administrator calls the focus on individual students “laser-like” and believes “the real difference maker is the time the teacher spends with the individual student.”

### **Prescriptive Strategy 3- Professional Learning Communities**

The school in question uses the Professional Learning Community (PLC) model. One administrator explains, “Teachers meet often to work together and discuss data.” Students get out of school an hour early on Wednesdays so teachers can meet for

an extended period of time. English teachers use this time to plan district writing, discuss teaching strategies, grade essays collaboratively, and otherwise work together. PLC meetings likely improve curricular continuity between grades.

### **Discretionary Strategies**

#### **Discretionary Strategy 1- Teacher and Administrator Individual Characteristics**

The team of five English teachers is all female and carry 15 years of teaching experience on average. None of the teachers have been middle school writing teachers exclusively. The teachers previously taught a variety of subjects including keyboarding, linguistics, elementary school, ELL, and study skills. Both administrators are male and average twenty-one years of teaching and administrative experience.

#### **Discretionary Strategy 2 - Preparation Time**

Students spend a little more than a third of their middle school English classes preparing for the eighth grade NESAW. Students write 8-10 essays practicing for the NESAW or about three per grade. These 8-10 essays are in addition to the five district and one state essay students write. Sixth and seventh graders spend one and a half to two months preparing for the test. Eighth graders spend up a full semester in direct preparation. Two teachers reported that students experience “burn out” if asked to write more than three essays during the descriptive writing unit and reported lower scores on the state test in the year where they were asked to write four essays. The teachers do not feel the amount of time spent preparing for the test is inappropriate. One teacher even claims she would spend more time in preparation if she could.

Even with spending such a long amount of time in direct test prep using a curriculum built to prepare students for the NESAW, only two teachers reported feeling pressure to teach to the test. The teachers all feel that teaching the descriptive essay at length and over the course of three years leads to strong test scores, and it does not negatively impact teacher autonomy over curriculum.

### **Discretionary Strategy 3 - Curriculum**

The school uses a combination of trademarked curriculum (Write Tools), teacher created materials, example essays, and the NESAW rubric. The curriculum is very similar across all grades. Students in each grade are expected to write five-paragraph essays on people, places, and objects. Curriculum is tailored to teach the exact skills assessed on the NESAW rubric. None of the teachers reported a problem with student disinterest in curriculum.

### **Discretionary Strategy 4 - Five-Paragraph Essay**

All of the teachers reported exclusively teaching the five-paragraph essay format for descriptive writing. The prescribed format varies little between the teachers. The structure taught is rigid and prototypical. Each of the teachers reported teaching student to write an introduction, three body paragraphs, a conclusion in each of their essays, and to include many detail sentences. Introductions are to begin with a hook, preview the three body paragraphs, and include a thesis. Each reports that the three body paragraphs include a topic sentence and end with a transition. Each teacher emphasized asking the students to include many details in their essay. Three out of the five specified a set

number of sentences they expect in each body paragraph at 5-9, 7-10, and 10-15 sentences. The teachers all require students to practice writing essays over a variety of descriptive topics using the exact same organizational structure: tell the reader what your three big ideas are going to be in the introduction, explain your big ideas in the body, and review the big ideas in the conclusion.

#### **5.4 Research Question One Summary**

Teacher and administrators completed a four-part survey. The survey was coded to find emerging themes and subthemes. Themes and subthemes regarding the following categories surfaced: commitment, curriculum, essay format, grading, special education, and poverty. The researcher used a combination of her own experience teaching at the school and the emergent themes and subthemes to identify three prescriptive (district required) strategies: district writing, middle school concept, and professional learning communities used at the school. The researcher also identified four discretionary themes (optional for teachers) using only the teacher and administrator surveys: staff individual characteristics, preparation time, curriculum, and the five-paragraph essay.

#### **5.5 Research Question 2- Teacher and Administrator Attitudes**

The following attitudes emerged from the teacher and administrator surveys.

##### **Attitude Toward Grading Accuracy**

Teachers generally feel that by double grading they increase the accuracy of the district writing results. They do not, however, have as much faith in the state's NESA-W grading. With one exception, all of the teachers agreed that NESA-W grading is too

subjective to be truly accurate. The teachers believe NESAW grades are dependent more on the individuals grading the paper for the state than on the student's writing. Of the few problems the teachers at the school have with the NESAW, state grading was one of the biggest concerns. Although, the teachers and administrators who reported feeling at odds with state grading seem to agree that the state grading process itself is fine, some erroneous scores are to be expected due to human error. Essentially, teachers recognize that individual grades are not perfect, but they are not concerned about the grading system overall.

### **Attitude Toward Five-Paragraph Essays**

All of the teachers at the school firmly believe the state and district graders are looking for the five-paragraph format. One teacher explains, "The five paragraph essay takes the mystery out what to do." All of the teachers think the format is ideal for middle school students and are wholly in favor of teaching the format, except one. The teacher who does not fully approve of the five-paragraph structure finds the format only slightly problematic.

One administrator feels the five-paragraph essay is an ideal format structure use in NESAW preparation and one asserts that the school is not using the structure in isolation. Interestingly, all the teachers say they are using that structure and make no mention of teaching students to deviate from the format. Teachers used the word "concrete" to describe the format, and three teachers indicated that creative students could expand the scope of their paper beyond the five paragraph once they have it mastered. No teacher mentions how the format can be adapted or expanded upon.

### **Attitude Toward Length of Time Spent Teaching Descriptive Writing**

Four teachers reported that they would spend about the same amount of time teaching descriptive writing if given total curricular control; the fifth teacher would spend more time on descriptive writing than she does now. The teachers and administrators do not feel too much time is being spent teaching descriptive writing. Furthermore, only two of the teachers reported feeling like they had to “teach to the test.” These two teachers, however, did not feel like teaching to the test is a bad thing, and one even equated teaching to the test with a desire for her students to succeed in general in stating that “...it would be silly not to- I want my kids to write well and be more successful.”

### **Attitude Toward the Descriptive Writing Genre**

Both administrators feel the descriptive genre is a good fit for middle school students. None of the teachers agree. Three teachers firmly assert their disapproval of using the descriptive genre for the NESAW. Two teachers are less firm in their disapproval but still have a generally negative view of the usefulness of the genre. Teachers would like to see the test utilize a genre more common in academic or “real world” writing. Still, based on the teacher's overall feelings about the test, they do not find the genre to so problematic that they would like to see the test majorly changed.

### **Attitude Toward Preparing At-Risk Students for the Test**

Three teachers and one administrator thought students who come from poverty sometimes lack the background knowledge needed for standardized writing tests. One teacher explains, “This year’s prompt was about an activity...some kids could choose a



concert, skiing, Husker games and those essays would stand out.” Students with fewer experiences are disadvantaged before they even take the test. All teachers, except one, and both administrators reported that at-risks students, particularly special education students, struggle with the test. All teachers and administrators think high ability learners are positively impacted by the test because they are so successful and can be pushed to score in the ‘exceeds’ category.

### **Ranking Responses**

Teachers and Administrators answered the following ranking questions in the final part of their surveys. Beneath each question are averages of the teacher and administrators numerical responses.

On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being strongly disagree and 10 being strongly agree) how do you respond to the following statement: District and state testing causes me stress.

Teacher: 6.6

Administrator: 3.5

On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being strongly disagree and 10 being strongly agree) how do you respond to the following statement: Teacher evaluations should be directly tied to standardized testing scores?

Teacher: 1

Administrator: 3.5

On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being strongly disagree and 10 being strongly agree) how do you respond to the following statement: I take pride in my students’ NESA-W writing scores?

Teacher: 9.2

Administrator: 10

On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being strongly disagree and 10 being strongly agree) how do you respond to the following statement: I would recommend that the Nebraska Department of Education continue its practice of utilizing the 8th grade NESAW in its current form.

Teacher: 5.4

Administrator: 8.5

### **5.6 Teacher and Administrator Attitude Summary**

Teacher and administrators completed a four-part survey. The survey was coded to find emerging themes and subthemes. Themes and subthemes regarding the following categories surfaced: commitment, curriculum, essay format, grading, special education, and poverty. The researcher used the emergent themes and subthemes to identify five attitudes held by most of the teachers and administrators: NESAW grading is not perfect but not hugely problematic, the five-paragraph essay structure is ideal for middle school, the school spends a reasonable amount of time in test preparation, the descriptive writing genre is not ideal for the eighth grade NESAW, and at-risk students sometimes lack the background knowledge needed for standardized writing tests. Teachers are moderately stressed out by the test, do not want evaluations should be directly tied to standardized testing scores, are proud of their students' NESAW scores, and do not have any significant problem with the state continuing to utilize the eighth grade NESAW in its current form. Administrators are barely stressed out by the test, generally do not think teacher evaluations should be directly tied to standardized testing scores, are very proud

of their students test scores, and largely support the state continuing to utilize the eighth grade NESAW in its current form.

### **5.7 Student and Parent Attitudes**

A total of 103 students agreed to take the survey about writing. Averages are rounded. The students are all current eighth graders. They took the survey just prior to taking the NESAW.

Question 1: How do you feel about writing?

- 21 students (20%) report they love to write.
- 65 students (63%) feel writing is okay.
- 15 students (15%) wish they were better writers.
- 2 students (2%) hate to write.

Question 2: How do you feel about taking the NESAW this year?

- 27 students (26%) are happy or excited to take it.
- 55 students (53%) are nervous about taking it.
- 11 students (11%) claim to not care about it.
- 10 students (10%) think the test is a waste of time.

Question 3: If you had to guess, how do you think you will do on the NESAW writing test this year?

- 36 students (35%) think they will get a high score.
- 61 students (59%) think they will pass.
- 2 students (2%) think they will not pass.
- 3 students (3%) think they will get a really low score.

## **Parent Survey Responses**

116 parents of eighth grade students agreed to take the survey during the same time frame that their children were surveyed.

Question 1: How does your student feel about writing?

- 24 parents (21%) think their child loves to write.
- 74 parents (64%) think their child feels writing is okay.
- 11 parents (9%) think their child struggles with writing.
- 7 parents (6%) think their child hates to write.

Question 2: How do you feel about your student taking the NES A writing test this year?

- 77 parents (66%) are glad their student is taking the test.
- 8 parents (7%) generally do not support the test.
- 0 parents have a strong objection to the test.
- 27 parents (23%) don't have any feeling, positive or negative about the test.
- 4 parents (3%) don't know anything about the test.

Question 3: If you had to guess, how do you think your student will do on the NES A writing test this year?

- 54 parents (47%) think their child will get a high score on the test.
- 56 parents (48%) think their child will pass the test.
- 2 parents (2%) think their child will not pass the test.
- 4 parents (3%) think their child will get a really low score on the test.

## **5.8 Student and Parent Attitude Summary**

Most students have a positive relationship with writing reporting either loving writing or thinking writing is okay. Parents were almost completely accurate when

reporting their students' feelings about writing. Most students feel happy/excited or nervous about taking the test. The majority of parents are glad their student is taking the test. The majority of students think they will pass the test or get a really high score and their parents agree, but parents are a little more optimistic than students about the children getting really high scores.

## **5.9 Analysis**

Survey research identified seven strategies that the school uses to secure high NESAW scores, three prescriptive (required by administrators) and four discretionary (optional). Because the strategies used at the school are intertwined with teacher, administrator, student, and parent attitudes toward testing, the following analysis examines both research questions and attitudes across all three participant groups.

The first prescriptive strategy "district writing" is likely the most influential and prominent strategy that the school employs. First, the district writing process makes all English teachers accountable for teaching all middle school students to write, not just eighth grade teachers. Spreading the responsibility of NESAW preparation out between all teachers likely lowers the stress levels of eighth grade teachers and may be a decisive reason why no teachers reported extremely high levels of stress surrounding the test. All students, including those labeled in this paper as carrying an at-risk status, are expected to write essays throughout middle school. The district writing process collects data that teachers can use to identify large-scale areas of weakness and identify specific students who may struggle with the state test.

Almost every student believes they will pass the test, and their parents agree, however the data showed that more than a few students at the target school do not pass every year. The biannual district testing in state testing conditions assists the teachers in determining who needs extra help. The extra repetition may increase student confidence in that students are familiar with the testing process and feel well prepared.

The second and third prescriptive strategies, the “middle school concept” and “PLC process” support NESAW preparation because they provide teachers with time to better their practices. All teachers are given time each day to meet with other teachers in addition to their regular plan period. Teacher collaboration is encouraged. Teachers can share ideas, strategies, and align curriculum. They can study trends in data from district writing assessments and brainstorm solutions to any problems. It seems likely that the team-centric approach to testing that follows long-term test preparation with ample time for teacher collaboration facilitates the can-do attitude that teachers have towards the test as evidenced by their pride in students NESAW scores and moderate support of the test. Moreover, a closer examination of the open-ended teacher responses shows striking similarities between the teachers responses, further evidence of a collective effort.

The first discretionary strategy “Teacher and Administrator Individual Characteristics” is more of a testament to the teacher and administrator commitment to their profession than an actual strategy. The teachers average 15 years experience and the administrators average 21 years. Professionals with this much experience in education may not experience as much stress as younger professionals, may be better equipped to reach at-risk students, and may be more knowledgeable about the NESAW in general. The teacher comments largely cited personal observations rather than empirical data,

which is consistent with teachers who have many years of experience in the classroom. The teachers and administrators at the school are committed to their jobs and to the school itself as further evidenced by their high level of pride in the testing results.

The second discretionary strategy, “Significant Preparation Time,” is an obviously important component of the school’s success. One can assume that the more time students spent practicing for the test, the higher scores would be. The school is clearly spending a great deal of time in direct test preparation. Teachers and administrators report positive feelings about spending such a long amount of time in preparing students for the test. Again, student confidence in their ability to pass the test is positively impacted by the amount of practice time they have to master the skills needed for the test. Students report liking writing or at least thinking writing is okay, so they must not be feeling either bored or overwhelmed by the writing curriculum at their school.

The third and fourth discretionary strategies, “Curriculum” and “Five-Paragraph Essays” are related. Teachers reported using a combination of trademarked curriculum and curriculum they designed themselves. Even with spending a significant amount of time in direct test prep using a curriculum largely based on the NESAW rubric, only two teachers reported feeling pressure to teach to the test. The teachers clearly are teaching to the test, but they are not reporting feeling overly pressured. Likewise, they are clearly teaching the five-paragraph essay, but are doing so on their own accord believing that the structure is both good for students to learn and useful for passing the NESAW. Teachers in the school are making their own day-to-day lessons from scratch and using trademarked curriculum as a reference more than a controlling force, perhaps, accounting

for some sense of autonomy despite an objectively uniform approach. Students are getting the benefit of teachers who are invested in a curriculum they designed to support test preparation, which may account for their positive response to the question about whether they enjoy writing.

Eleven questions in the teacher survey were written with possible responses ranging from 1 to 10 and in only one question were the responses identical. That question asked whether teachers evaluations should be directly tied to standardized test scores, and all five teachers as well as one administrator selected one (not at all). The question is significant in that if the teachers felt influenced to support the school and district's policies across the board they likely would not have all answered the way that they did. The responses given suggest that the teachers do recognize that many factors influence the students' results and some are outside of their control. It shows that the teachers may genuinely trust the efficacy of the NESAW testing process while at the same time recognizing superseding factors that inhibit the ability to fairly connect teacher effectiveness with student scores. Another interpretation is that their desire to disconnect student performance with teacher evaluations coupled with the initiative to request that an intra-school test be double graded by all teachers shows the importance that the school places on the tests.

In addition, a common theme throughout the teacher responses is that the state tests are graded inconsistently or incorrectly. The same desire to double score internally and to disassociate teacher assessment with student performance on the NESAW not only suggests that external factors dictate student scoring, it could alternatively suggest



that 8th grade teachers do not trust in the state's grading to determine their worth as an educator.

## **Chapter 6— *Discussion and Conclusions***

### **6.1 Examining the Relationship Between Government Policy and Educator's Attitudes**

As this paper discussed in Chapter 2, federal funding is of greater concern to poorer schools and districts that receive a larger proportion of their budget from federal monies, particularly with respect to Title One funds. To continue receiving federal funds, Nebraska has adopted policies connecting teacher assessment with student's testing results and statewide rankings of school's achievement on core tests including the NESAW. Furthermore, these standardized tests were generally conceived with the purpose of increasing student achievement among at-risk students. During NCLB's peak, and the years when NESAW has been scored (2011-2015), schools were tasked with achieving 100% passing results on all standardized tests. The federal government and State of Nebraska later acknowledged that this standard was not realistic. It is reasonable to expect that high stakes combined with unrealistic expectations would leave stakeholders at at-risk schools with negative attitudes towards the tests.

As explained in section 2.1, federal policy has generally increased its reliance on standardized testing at the state and national levels since president Johnson signed the ESEA in the 1960's. The expectations and consequences for schools to meet state and federal testing standards generally increased through the early 2000's and plateaued or slightly abated during this past year. Along the way a common message emerged that standardized testing deters educators from giving up on higher risk students and the dogma that all students have the ability to succeed given the proper learning environment, sufficient resources, and a motivated and monitored group of teachers.

Regardless of the objective value of standardized testing including the NESAW, if the school's professionals agree with the policy rationale behind the testing, it becomes much easier to develop positive attitudes towards the test from the top down. The teachers unanimously reported it would be unfair to directly connect student's results to teacher's evaluations and recognized serious obstacles that limit their ability to achieve 100% compliance. The results of this study showed a group of teaching professionals and administrators that were able to value the intrinsic benefits of the testing process and focus more on maximizing student achievement rather than dwelling on any perceived limitations. Their belief that the testing is in the best interests of their students is demonstrated by the common belief that it was all right and even beneficial for the students to spend a large portion of the year directly preparing for the test. Moreover this was underscored with opinions by administrators that the testing process was acceptable as is and numerous comments indicating that the NESAW is an effective process that develops true writing skill.

Professionals at the target school share the same core beliefs as the policy makers, starting from the top. One administrator stated that "It is not impossible to achieve results if the teachers do the right work" and the test "...makes sure that we keep the bar high for all kids and not allow those disadvantages to become an excuse" These comments closely mirror the 1992 congressional committee report which recommended in part that "schools should not divert students with poor initial performance into less demanding courses with lower expectations, but rather must redouble efforts and improve instruction." The target school redoubled efforts to test each student twice annually in a simulated version of the state test. The results of the teacher and administrator surveys

show that the educators followed the direction of administration by drawing upon the positive aspects of the test while not dwelling upon its perceived limitations.

## **6.2 Teaching Strategy and At-Risk Students**

While Scot et al. (2009) concluded referencing special education that teachers cannot “honor the differing needs of all students” due to the unintended effects of high-stakes testing (p. 40). Teachers and administrators at the target school generally agreed that at-risk students sometimes lack the background knowledge needed for standardized writing tests. Students and their parents largely expect to pass the test or get a really high score, so they do not feel they lack the background knowledge. The research demonstrated that educators at the school recognize challenges facing at risk groups and target their efforts to empower these students.

The research indicates that teachers view testing accommodations as important to the success of their special education students. The responses further suggests an awareness of the state’s rules regarding testing accommodations and is displeased with the trend of tighter regulation concerning the use of accommodations in recent years. Further, teacher and administrator respondents noted that poorer students sometimes struggle to generate ideas because of a simpler lifestyle with limited opportunities. This ties in closely with Beckman et al. (2012) who reported that long-term poverty has a significant impact on cognitive and academic achievement because learning is tied to prior learning opportunities and experience. In response to this perceived difficulty, the school uses repetition through numerous descriptive essay assignments in addition to the district testing. Teachers and administrator opinion is mixed as to the efficacy of focusing solely on descriptive writing rather than other genres. It does logically follow that as

students write descriptive essays over and over they develop strategies for brainstorming and may even be able to adapt an earlier work to the prompt they are given on the official NESAW State Test. Teachers generally report assigning three descriptive writing assignments in addition to the two district tests each year. This means that most students will have attempted fourteen prompts on a person, place, or thing before the actual test.

It follows then that while the students clearly know what to expect when they get to the state test, and that their teachers have worked to develop the unique talents of each student to do their best work that the students will pick up on this. The research shows that the majority of students feel anxious about the NESAW. The fact that the students have anxiety about the test may or may not affect their ability to perform on the test day, however more importantly it highlights that they are aware of the importance of the test, and the importance of doing well. They may not be aware of how it is important, only that this is the culminating event in their middle school writing and that it is important in some way.

### **6.3 Attitudes Across Participant Groups**

Perhaps the most telling finding in the study reveals that administrators have minimal stress associated with the test, teachers are only moderately stressed by the test, and students and their parents believe test scores will be either “proficient” or “very high.” The lack of debilitating stress stems from internal structures within the school that are largely in line with federal ideals of No Child Left Behind and the Every Student Succeeds Act. The middle school concept, professional learning communities, and district writing process combine to form a structure that allows for what one administrator called a “laser-like” focus on the needs of individual students. These key

top-down structures in the school may be contributing to confidence for all involved: students, parents, teachers, and administrators. The resulting decreased stress levels could be an important factor encouraging teacher and administrator commitment to the school. Hill and Barth (2004) claim that high-stakes standardized testing in the United States has negatively impacted teacher retention, but retention rates among English teachers and administrators is extremely high at the target school. The stress of high-stakes writing tests in the target school is not enough to incentivize the teachers or administrators to seek other employment options.

The target school not only lacks problems with teacher retention, but also its teachers do not feel like curriculum is negatively impacted by the NESAW. Researchers have claimed that standardized testing causes teachers to limit curriculum and teach to the test. Curriculum has arguably been limited by the NESAW test at the school. However, the teachers do not report feeling uneasy with the lessons or that they are harming student's education. In fact, they assert they would continue spending the same amount of time on the same curriculum even if the test changed. Perhaps these feelings can be traced to the fact that writing tests are the most flexible of all the standardized tests currently in place in Nebraska. Whereas other assessments are largely multiple choice "bubble" tests, the NESAW is an open-ended performance test; answers cannot be memorized. Therefore, although teachers are limited by genre, some degree of autonomy and creativeness remains.

#### **6.4 NESAW Role in Student Learning**

The target school information also suggests that it may be possible to teach both "for learning" and "for the test." Although Benko (2012) argues that focusing curriculum

on standardized tests limits students' ability to connect with content they find interesting, the student surveys show that students have a generally positive view of writing. If they were bored or overly taxed by the school's curriculum, students survey responses would likely have been less positive. Thomson & Cook, (2013) assert that overemphasis on test scores likely causes a narrowing of curriculum and, thereby, a reduction of teachers' creative control. Also, as stated in Chapter 3 of this paper, Mayo (2005) calls the sacrifice that teachers make to teach "for the test," rather than teach "for knowledge," "well-intentioned" but unethical. However, the teachers at the test school are teaching "for the test" at the school, but they seem to also feel that are teaching "for knowledge." For example, teachers push the five-paragraph structure knowing that it leads to higher test scores, but they do not teach the five-paragraph essay only because it will lead to high test scores. Four teachers and one administrator expressed approval of the format and some teachers were adamant in their defense of format in arguing that middle school students need master the structure before they are ready to self-organize essays. Teachers are maintaining control in important ways such as making their own curriculum and integrating trademarked curriculum at their discretion. This suggests, perhaps, that teaching "for the test" and "for learning" are not mutually exclusive according to the teachers and administrators at the school.

Of course, teachers do report fundamental problems with the NESAW including technology and scoring error. Graham's meta-analysis found the type of scoring used on NESAW tends to be reliable in less than half of the studies he examined. Graham et al. (2011) explained that problems with standardized writing scoring goes beyond different raters failing to score identically. Other problems include day-to-day variation in student

writing and similar assessments not necessarily producing similar results. Furthermore, grading one piece of writing and expecting it to indicate a student's ability to write, in general, is problematic to researchers. Students could have an "off" day when taking the NESAW, write poorly due to stress, or fail to be motivated by the essay topic. Teachers and administrators at the target school are either not aware of or not overly concerned with potential scoring errors. Perhaps the teachers are willing to accept imperfect, and even downright questionable, scoring because they believe the process of test preparation is valuable in itself. One teacher wrote, "Think about how much worse it could be." She was alluding to how she believes the trade-off between imperfect scoring of authentic student writing and the perfect grading of bubble tests about writing is more than worth it. It is important to note that while educators and administrators in the survey lauded the efficacy of the test they were hesitant to take the next step and interpret the results in the ways that NCLB and ESSA require.

### **6.5 Practical Implications**

Though it is not possible to generalize the results of this study, it is possible that other at-risk schools aiming to raise NESAW scores could gainfully adopt some or all of the target school's strategies. The results of the study show that it is possible for an at-risk middle school to earn high scores on the NESAW. Furthermore, it is possible for teachers and administrators at an at-risk school to have generally positive outlook on the utility of the NESAW, ultimately reporting a mild support (in the case of teachers) and significant support (in the case of administrators) of the state continuing using the test in its current form.



## 6.6 Limitations of the Study

There were significant limitations in this study. All of the data was based on survey data. One limitation of survey data is the honesty and contribution of the participants. It is possible that the teachers and administrators who completed the surveys wanted to hide some of their feelings because their attitudes were not tested collaterally. It is also possible they did not want to take the time to give in-depth answers to the questions. Students and parents who complete the survey may have hid their true feelings as well. Furthermore, while there was a 100% participation rate for teachers and administrators, not all of the students and parents who received surveys opted to participate. Therefore, it is possible that the students and parents who did participate are not representative of the whole.

Also, the ability to generalize the data from this study is extremely limited due to the nature of the case studies. Qualitative research, especially in relation to case studies, is not intended to reflect large populations, but rather to define specific small groups. Therefore, the strategies in place at the target school allowing for high NESAW scores would not necessarily apply at another school. However, a case study such as this one enables the development of themes and subthemes and provides an anecdotal account to potentially support or refute rationale for testing as a means to improve the quality of education for at-risk student groups.

Furthermore, this case study seeks only to understand the eighth grade NESAW process at one particular school in Nebraska. It does not attempt to study any other schools. Within the one target school, this study looks only at the eighth grade NESAW. It does not consider the writing components found in other standardized tests, such as

multiple choice grammar questions or the proposed text dependent analysis of the NESA reading test. It is possible that the target school provides writing instruction outside of the English/Language Arts classroom. However this study does not consider such instruction due to measurement difficulty arising from the varied and unreliable nature in many cases. Furthermore, while the researcher has no reason to suspect that students at the target school earned their NESA-W scores dishonestly, she assumes the authenticity of the scores. The researcher can prove that the principal of the school did sign the “The Test Security Agreement,” thereby promising to utilize security measures to discourage cheating and that all testing materials will be handled securely. Finally, the researcher’s close connection with the school in question is a limitation. Because the researcher is a teacher at the school in question, the researcher has a deep understanding of performance and perceptions at the school, but cannot define her understanding as purely objective.

## **6.7 Future Research**

Studying NESA scores in additional subject areas would provide a better insight into the school and the culture of NESA success. Also, further survey of special education teachers and ELL teachers would provide a more robust view of those subgroups of students. Additionally, quantitative comparisons of schools that use or do not use the target school’s identified strategies would provide more generalizable results to predict NESA-W success across Nebraska, or even other states. Studies could compare NESA-W scores with curriculum, district writing requirements, number of practice essays assigned, or any other variable. A study looking at the effects of labeling a school as a “breakthrough” or “needs improvement” school would be interesting as well.

## 6.8 Conclusion

Blake et al. (2010) asserts that student achievement on standardized tests is guided by their teachers' attitude toward high-stakes testing, implying more at-risk students will pass standardized tests if their teachers develop a positive, "can-do" attitude towards the test. Teachers, and particularly administrators, at the school in question are using strategies that make a "can do" attitude more possible. These strategies include the district writing process, commitment to the middle school concept, the use of Professional Learning Communities, experienced staff, significant preparation time, a varied curriculum, and teaching the five-paragraph essay. These strategies have proven successful in earning higher than average NESAW scores for all students, particularly students who fall into the at-risk subgroups of Hispanic, low-income, and special education categories. The strategies not only working in the sense that they are leading to higher than average NESAW scores, they are also working in the sense that teachers and administrators approve of the strategies as evidenced by their lack of reporting serious problems with the test preparation strategies or with the test itself. All teachers and administrators recommend that the state continue to utilize the test in its current form. Parents at the school are supportive of the test, and students believe success is attainable. The true success of the school is in its ability to take advantage of the strengths of the standardized testing regime which include ensuring high level of teacher commitment to a core subject area and ensuring that every student, including those identified as at-risk, receive an individually tailored and rigorous academic experience.

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## Appendix A

### IRB Approval Letter

# Official Approval Letter for IRB project #15556 - New Project Form

January 5, 2016

Jillian Quandt  
Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education

John Raible  
Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education 25 HENZ, UNL, 68588-0355

IRB Number: 20160115556EX

Project ID: 15556

Project Title: Perceptions of the Eighth Grade Writing Assessment at a Nationally Recognized Middle School

Dear Jillian:

This letter is to officially notify you of the certification of exemption of your project for the Protection of Human Subjects. Your proposal is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance 00002258 and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46) and has been classified as exempt.

You are authorized to implement this study as of the Date of Final Exemption:  
01/05/2016

o Review conducted using exempt category 1 at 45 CFR 46.101 o Funding: N/A

We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:

- \* Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;
- \* Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
- \* Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;
- \* Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or
- \* Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

This project should be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Guidelines and you should notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that may affect the exempt status of your research project. You should report any

unanticipated problems involving risks to the participants or others to the Board.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at 402-472-6965. Sincerely,

Becky R. Freeman, CIP for the IRB

University of Nebraska-Lincoln Office of Research and Economic Development

[nugrant.unl.edu](http://nugrant.unl.edu)

*Becky R. Freeman*



NUgrant

## Appendix B

### Teacher Survey

## Teacher Survey

### Part One: Basic Information

Code Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Years of Teaching Experience: \_\_\_\_\_

Current Positions at School: \_\_\_\_\_

Past Teaching Positions: \_\_\_\_\_

### Part Two: Teaching Norms

1. What curriculum or other tools do you use to prepare students for the district writing and/or the NESAW?

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2. Do you teach a basic essay format? If you do, what are the required components of the essay?

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3. How much time do you spend teaching descriptive writing, and how is this time spent?

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4. How many descriptive essays have students written for you before they take the district or state writing assessment? Why did you choose this number?

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5. Describe your role in the scoring process for district/state writing and compare and contrast it with your typical essay grading norms.

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### Part 3: Response to Testing Controversies

5. Do you believe the way district and state writing is graded is problematic? Explain.

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\* On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being no problem and 10 being huge problem), how big of a problem is scoring accuracy in standardized writing testing? \_\_\_\_\_

6. Would you say that your district and state are looking for a “traditional five paragraph essay” in their standardized writing assessment? If so, do you believe there are problems with teaching that writing format? Explain.

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\*On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being no problem and 10 being huge problem), how big of a problem is teaching a student to write a five-paragraph essay for district/state assessments? \_\_\_\_\_

7A. If you could run your classroom in the way you see as best, would you spend more or less time teaching descriptive writing?

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7b. Do you feel you must “teach to the test” when preparing for district writing or the NESAW? Explain.

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\*On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being no problem and 10 being huge problem), how big of a problem is teaching to the test? \_\_\_\_\_

8. Does district writing or the NESAW excessively limit your academic freedom as a teacher?

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\*On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being no problem and 10 being huge problem), how big of a problem is the loss of academic freedom due to testing requirements? \_\_\_\_\_

9. Do you feel descriptive writing is an ideal genre to use for middle school district and state testing? Explain.

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\*On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being no problem and 10 being huge problem), how big of a problem is the choice of descriptive writing as middle school testing genre? \_\_\_\_\_

10A. How do district writing and the NESAW impact traditionally underserved students such as racial minorities, students who fall below the poverty level, and English Language Learners? Explain.

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10B. How does district writing and the NESAW impact special education students?

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10C. How does district writing and the NESAW impact high ability learners? Explain.

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\*On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being no problem and 10 being huge problem), how big of a problem is aiming for 100% student proficiency on the NESAW? \_\_\_\_\_

#### Part 4: Overall Opinions

On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being strongly disagree and 10 being strongly agree) how do you respond to the following statement: District and state testing causes me stress.

\_\_\_\_\_

On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being strongly disagree and 10 being strongly agree) how do you respond to the following statement: Standardized writing testing represents best practice teaching methodology?

\_\_\_\_\_

On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being strongly disagree and 10 being strongly agree) how do you respond to the following statement: Teacher evaluations should be directly tied to standardized testing scores?

\_\_\_\_\_

On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being strongly disagree and 10 being strongly agree) how do you respond to the following statement: I take pride in my students' NESAW writing scores?

\_\_\_\_\_

On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being strongly disagree and 10 being strongly agree) how do you respond to the following statement: I would recommend that the Nebraska Department of Education continue its practice of utilizing the 8th grade NESAW in its current form.

## Appendix C

### Administrator Survey

## Part One: Basic Information

## Administrator Survey

Code Name: Mr. Jones

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Years of Teaching Experience: \_\_\_\_\_

Current Positions: \_\_\_\_\_

Past Positions within Education: \_\_\_\_\_

## Part Two: Teaching Norms

1. Explain the progression students follow throughout middle school to prepare for the NESAW.

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2. Your 8th graders scored 14 points above the Nebraska state average last year on the

NESA-W. Why are your students so successful?

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3. Your school has a large percentage of English Language Learners, Special Education students, and students who qualify for free/reduced lunches. Given those populations, your success on the NESA-W is especially impressive. Other schools with similar demographics are not as successful on the 8th grade NESA-W. What makes your school different?

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2. What curriculum or other tools does your middle school use to prepare students for the district writing and/or the NESA-W?

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4. How much time do your middle school language arts teachers spend teaching descriptive writing?

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### Part 3: Response to Testing Controversies

1. Do you believe the way district and/or state writing is graded is problematic? Explain.

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\* On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being no problem and 10 being huge problem), how big of a problem is scoring accuracy in standardized writing testing? \_\_\_\_\_

2. Would you say that your district and state are looking for “traditional five paragraph essay” in their standardized writing assessment? If so, do you believe there are problems

with teaching that writing format? Explain.

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\*On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being no problem and 10 being huge problem), how big of a problem is teaching students to write a five paragraph essay for district/state assessments?

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3. Does the NESAW excessively limit district and teacher autonomy? Explain.

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\*On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being no problem and 10 being huge problem), how big of a problem is the loss of academic autonomy due to testing requirements? \_\_\_\_\_

4. Do you feel descriptive writing is an ideal genre to use for middle school district and state testing? Explain.

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\*On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being no problem and 10 being huge problem), how big of a problem is the choice of descriptive writing as middle school testing genre? \_\_\_\_\_

5. How does district writing and the NESAW impact traditionally underserved students such as racial minorities, students who fall below the poverty level, and English Language Learners?

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6. How does district writing and the NESAW impact special education students?

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7. How does district writing and the NES-A-W impact high ability learners? Explain.

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\*On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being no problem and 10 being huge problem), how big of a problem is aiming for 100% student proficiency on the NES-A-W? \_\_\_\_\_

#### Part 4: Overall Opinions

On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being strongly disagree and 10 being strongly agree) how do you respond to the following statement: District and state writing testing causes me stress.

\_\_\_\_\_



On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being strongly disagree and 10 being strongly agree) how do you respond to the following statement: Standardized writing testing represents best practice teaching methodology?

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On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being strongly disagree and 10 being strongly agree) how do you respond to the following statement: Teacher evaluations should be directly tied to their students' standardized testing scores?

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On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being strongly disagree and 10 being strongly agree) how do you respond to the following statement: I take pride in my students' NESAW writing scores?

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On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being strongly disagree and 10 being strongly agree) how do you respond to the following statement: I would recommend that the Nebraska Department of Education continue its practice of utilizing the 8th grade NESAW in its current form.

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## Appendix D

### Parent Survey



### Parent Writing Survey

**1. How does your student feel about writing? Circle the response that applies to your student.**

He/She loves to write.

He/She thinks writing is okay.

He/She struggles with writing.

He/She hates to write.

**2. How do you feel about your student taking the NESA writing test this year? Circle the response that applies to you.**

I am glad my student is taking the test.

I generally do not support this test.

I have a strong objection to this test.

I don't have a strong feeling either way.

I don't know anything about this test.

**3. If you had to guess, how do you think your student will do on the NESA writing test this year? Circle the response that applies to you.**

He/She will get a high score.

He/She will pass.

He/She will not pass.

He/She will get a really low score.

## Appendix E

### Youth Survey

### **Student Writing Survey**

**1. How do you feel about writing? Check the box that applies to you.**

☐ I love to write.

☐ Writing is okay.

☐ I wish I was a better writer.

☐ I hate to write.

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**2. How do you feel about taking the NESA writing test this year? Check the box that applies to you.**

☐ I am happy or excited to take it.

☐ I am nervous.

☐ I don't really care about it.

☐ I am dreading it or think it is a waste of time.

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**3. If you had to guess, how do you think you will do on the NESA writing test this year?**

☐ I will get a high score.

☐ I will pass.

☐ I will not pass.

☐ I will get a really low score.

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix F

### NESA-W Scoring Rubric

Nebraska Department of Education Scoring Guide for Descriptive Writing – Analytic- GRADE 8				
	1	2	3	4
<b>IDEAS/ CONTENT</b> 35%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The picture of what is being described is unclear.</li> <li>Content has many digressions from the topic.</li> <li>Sensory details are lacking.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The picture of what is being described is limited.</li> <li>Content has some digressions from the topic.</li> <li>Sensory details are limited or unrelated.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The picture of what is being described is clear.</li> <li>Content is generally focused on the topic.</li> <li>Sensory details are adequate and related.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The picture of what is being described is clear and vivid.</li> <li>Content is well-focused on the topic.</li> <li>Sensory details are numerous and relevant.</li> </ul>
<b>ORGANIZATION</b> 25%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Structural development of an introduction, body, and conclusion is lacking.</li> <li>Pacing is awkward.</li> <li>Transitions are missing or connections are unclear.</li> <li>Paragraphing is ineffective or missing.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Structural development of an introduction, body, and conclusion is limited.</li> <li>Pacing is somewhat inconsistent.</li> <li>Transitions are repetitious or weak.</li> <li>Paragraphing is irregular.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Structural development of an introduction, body, and conclusion is functional.</li> <li>Pacing is generally controlled.</li> <li>Transitions are functional.</li> <li>Paragraphing is generally successful.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Structural development of an introduction, body, and conclusion is effective.</li> <li>Pacing is well-controlled.</li> <li>Transitions effectively show how ideas connect.</li> <li>Paragraphing is sound.</li> </ul>
<b>VOICE/ WORD CHOICE</b> 20%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wording is inexpressive and lifeless, conveying little sense of the writer.</li> <li>Voice inappropriate for the purpose and audience.</li> <li>Language is neither specific, precise, nor varied.</li> <li>Few, if any, vivid words or phrases are used.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wording is occasionally expressive, conveying a limited sense of the writer.</li> <li>Voice is sometimes inappropriate for the purpose and audience.</li> <li>Language is occasionally specific, precise, and varied.</li> <li>Some vivid words and phrases are used.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wording is generally expressive, conveying a sense of the writer.</li> <li>Voice is generally appropriate for the purpose and audience.</li> <li>Language is generally specific, precise, and varied.</li> <li>Adequate vivid words and phrases are used.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wording is expressive and engaging, conveying a strong sense of the writer throughout.</li> <li>Voice is well-suited for the purpose and audience throughout.</li> <li>Language is specific, precise, and varied throughout.</li> <li>Numerous vivid words and phrases used effectively.</li> </ul>
<b>SENTENCE FLUENCY/ CONVENTIONS</b> 20%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sentences seldom vary in length or structure.</li> <li>Phrasing sounds awkward and unnatural.</li> <li>Fragments or run-ons confuse the reader.</li> <li>Grammar, usage, punctuation, and spelling errors throughout distract the reader.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sentences occasionally vary in length or structure.</li> <li>Phrasing occasionally sounds unnatural.</li> <li>Fragments or run-ons sometimes confuse the reader.</li> <li>Grammar, usage, punctuation, and spelling errors may distract the reader.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sentences generally vary in length or structure.</li> <li>Phrasing generally sounds natural.</li> <li>Fragments and run-ons, if present, do not confuse the reader.</li> <li>Grammar, usage, punctuation, and spelling are usually correct and errors do not distract the reader.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sentences vary in length and structure throughout.</li> <li>Phrasing consistently sounds natural and conveys meaning.</li> <li>Fragments and run-ons, if present, are intended for stylistic effect.</li> <li>Grammar, usage, punctuation, and spelling are consistently correct and may be manipulated for stylistic effect.</li> </ul>

