Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 22
Issue 2 *Celebrating Two Decades of the
Language Arts Journal of Michigan*

Article 9

2006

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Recommended Citation

Brinkley, Ellen H. (2006) "Responding to Michigan's Legislative Mandates," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 22: Iss. 2, Article 9.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1158>

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Responding to Michigan's Legislative Mandates

Ellen H. Brinkley

(Originally published: Fall 1993: 31-34)

The envelope that arrived in October 1991 came from a national, out-of-state testing company. Inside were the English, Language Arts, and Reading objectives for a newly-mandated Michigan teacher competency test. I was being asked as a teacher educator to complete a content validation survey and to offer my comments and suggestions on the half sheet of paper provided.

What followed was a series of countless individual and collective decisions that together added up to making a difference in how English language arts is—and will be—taught and learned in Michigan. Two issues were at stake—a teacher competency test affecting all preservice teachers and a high-stakes proficiency test affecting all potential high school graduates.

I wish I could say that the Michigan Council of Teachers of English managed to persuade state legislators not to insist that all preservice teachers pass a teacher competency test. I wish I could also say that we persuaded them not to insist that all high school students pass a proficiency test. Unfortunately, neither is true. What I can do, however, is describe how we became deeply involved in shaping the events that followed the legislative mandates and what we learned from those experiences.

Teacher Competency Test Protests

On the day that the content validation survey arrived, I had quickly scanned the lists of objectives. The first one on the English list was "Apply the rules of punctuation." The first Reading objective was "Identify techniques for teaching word analysis and word recognition skills." I sighed and stuffed the sheets into my book bag.

This could have been the end of the story. After all, I was teaching a full load of courses. As president-elect of the Michigan Council, I was in charge of the fall conference program just a few weeks away. There's only so much one

person can do, and too often one voice doesn't make much difference. But I did take time to fill out the survey and neatly type in as many comments as I could fit in the small space provided—comments that started this way:

To my great disappointment, the objectives included reflect an English teaching and learning model that is ten years out of date! These objectives appear tailored for a transmission model of teaching and learning the old paradigms. They emphasize form and terminology over content. They emphasize rules over precision in language use.

As luck would have it, our fall conference keynote speaker was Miles Myers, NCTE's Executive Director. During his stay he took the time to sit patiently with us, offering insight and suggestions as we considered a variety of options. Later that weekend Connie Weaver, also a featured speaker, and Marilyn Wilson, MCTE's College Chair, worked late into the night drafting a resolution protesting the form and content of the tests. No one would have criticized them if they had gone on to bed after a long conference day, but these small decisions made by individuals made a difference.

At the next morning's annual business meeting, the teacher assessment resolution was formally adopted. The effect of the passage of the resolution was to focus greater attention on the competency testing issue and to provide a way for more of the multiple voices of MCTE's members to be heard. During the weeks following the conference, we sent letters and copies of the resolution to the Department of Education, to the testing company, to state legislators, and to the governor. A small group met with the chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee for School Aid.

Finally on February 13 four MCTE representatives testified at a Joint Hearing of the Senate and House Appropriations Committee. Although none of us had spent much time in legislative hearing rooms, we had prepared statements to read at the hearing and arrived early enough to get seats in the front row. Later the aisles were jammed with teacher educators, preservice teachers, and television crews. When it was our turn, we spoke both as teacher educators and as MCTE representatives, explaining our objections and offering to help design a more appropriate assessment. But we sat for five hours before the first of us was called to testify. In hindsight, I realize that our MCTE colleagues would certainly have understood if we had slipped out after the first four hours, but again individual decisions to stick it out made a difference.

In the spring some of us were asked to participate in the review of test items. It took a whole day of sitting in a hotel ballroom reading items and writing out objections. We later learned how important each individual response was, since apparently each content area test was reviewed by as few as five persons across the state.

Once all the reviews were done and the materials had been studied, the Department of Education and the testing company decided to create an entire new Reading test, to include the English test as one of only twenty (of the 75 or so tests) identified for eventual revision, and to schedule the Language Arts test for immediate revision. Several of the MCTE protestors were among the group later convened to produce the new Language Arts objectives. Fortunately, the revision process has not been superficial but has involved substantive discussions and decisions and the opportunity to produce test objectives based on current English language arts theory and practice.

High School Proficiency Testing

By fall of 1992, as president of the Michigan Council, I was again busily preparing for the annual state conference. Again, however, with no warning my busy routine was interrupted. In this case, MCTE would play an even more important role.

Actually it took some time to realize fully what was going on. I began to get rather urgent phone calls from leaders of other state organizations, such as the Michigan Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the Michigan Reading Association. They wanted to know what I knew about the Michigan high school proficiency test. Eventually it sunk in that the Michigan Council of Teachers of English was going to be asked to bid on a contract to develop the framework for the writing component of the proficiency test.

Had our voices been heard on the teacher competency issue when we had insisted we knew how authentic assessment should be done? I think so. When the four content organizations (representing math, English, science, and reading) met with the State Superintendent for Public Instruction, we sensed that he was saying in effect, "If you think you can do it better, here's your chance. Now show us."

On the issue of high-stakes testing, however, we were less sure about the right course to take. Sheila Fitzgerald, past president of both MCTE and NCTE, reminded us that in

a time of shrinking financial resources, surely the State had better uses for its money than to spend it on yet another test. Surely adding a new hurdle for high school graduation would not be in all students' and teachers' best interests. The leaders of the four organizations seriously considered a joint effort to fight the statewide testing. We appeared at a State Board of Education meeting and each expressed our fears about developing high-stakes testing.

On the other hand, the proficiency test legislation had already been enacted, and an expert panel report had already been written about its implementation. We knew that if we refused to participate, we would have a harder time later criticizing whatever the testing companies produced. Finally, each organization's board made the very big decision to draw up a curricular framework and assessment plan.

Day by day a variety of decisions had to be made—how to write the proposal responding to the State's RFP (Request for Proposals), how to project a budget for the \$40,000 contract we anticipated receiving, how to enlist quickly a wide range of educators from around the state for the project's management team and advisory committee. As project manager, I learned fast not to apologize when I needed information or advice, and by early January the proposal was submitted and the committee members were ready to meet. We set a schedule of weekend meetings, mindful of an incredibly tight timeline, since the framework document was due to the Department of Education by the end of March. Then we settled in for what we thought might be the least difficult part of the process—discussing how writing is taught and learned in Michigan and determining what our assessment recommendations would be. We were charged specifically not to develop a minimum competency test and not to recommend only multiple-choice items. We were strongly encouraged to include performance assessment. As composition specialists and classroom teachers of writing, we knew that performance assessment was exactly what we would recommend and that we could depend on the well-established validity of large-scale writing assessment.

The frustration came, however, in struggling to include more than quick writing in isolation to a few prompts. As it turned out, the psychometricians and attorneys who worked with us were generally uncomfortable with performance assessment and kept reminding us of past court cases, as if the future had to be shaped primarily by what had been legally defensible in the past. What we eventually recommended—two pieces of writing produced in a

controlled setting, one piece composed in a semi-controlled setting, and two pieces from classroom portfolios to be counted but not scored—is a subject for another article. Now that we have managed to produce the final documents, we can catch our breath and wonder about the future. The Writing Framework will be disseminated for public review around the state and then submitted for approval by the State Board of Education. Although we've been assured that we will be involved in the test development process, we still worry about who will do what with our recommendations.

Regardless of what eventually occurs, however, we believe that our involvement in the framework project has produced a number of positive outcomes:

1. Although we know how frequently bad things happen to good ideas, we believe that writing will be taken more seriously in Michigan by students, teachers, administrators, and parents if it is assessed at the state level. We hope we have designed an assessment plan that is worth teaching to.
2. We have learned the difference between working informally with the State and having a contractual agreement with them. The \$40,000 contract gave MCTE control over how the money would be spent, who would be involved, and how the project would be carried out. Although countless hours of time were donated by everyone involved in the project, the contract not only covered project expenses but also allowed for buying some of the project manager's time.
3. During February we conducted nine site meetings around the state to discuss early drafts of the curriculum framework and assessment plan. These meetings gave teachers an opportunity to be involved and to re-think how writing is taught and learned and assessed. We were happy to be able to include even teachers from the remote upper peninsula, who seldom feel they have a voice in what happens "downstate."
4. We have developed and strengthened relationships with other content organizations in the state—the Michigan Council of Teachers of Mathematics, Michigan Reading Association, and Michigan Science Teachers Association—as we met for occasional strategy sessions. We anticipate future occasions when such links will be important.
5. We have also formed links with leaders from several state business and professional organizations—such as the Michigan Chamber of Commerce, the Michigan Association

of Secondary School Principals, parents' groups, and special educators—since we are all members of the newly-formed Superintendent's Advisory Committee for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. We have become more visible as content area experts interested in a broad range of issues.

Making a Difference

As we worked on both the teacher competency issue and on the writing framework project, we had long theoretical discussions and frequently disagreed on one point or another. Along the way, however, we kept reminding ourselves of the one point on which there was complete agreement—that our most important task was to serve as advocates for literacy learners. This was especially true once we discovered that legislation can be enacted by lawmakers who seem relatively unaware of the implications of what they mandate. The need for MCTE to be more proactive as well as reactive is clear.

When professional organizations like MCTE are faced with important issues, sometimes the big decisions—those made by board members sitting in meetings—are actually the easiest ones to make. Often the small, individual decisions based on personal and professional insight and commitment are more difficult to make but just as important. Too often, I believe, English language arts teachers are inclined to assume that others are the experts. One of our most important discoveries was that statewide projects call for a wide range of individual talents and expertise. We realized as we worked through our long sessions that the perspective and effort of every one of us involved was needed if we were to make a positive difference.