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Editors' Message

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Editors' Message

These are perilous times for English language arts teachers. With the onset of the No Child Left Behind version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, English language arts and mathematics teachers have witnessed a winnowing of their decision-making powers in the classroom, primarily because of the law's requirement that students in grades 3-8 show an increase in standardized test scores each year. Schools that serve a large number of students who speak other languages or who speak a non-privileged dialect of English have struggled to help their students meet state test averages. More affluent schools whose students often set the state averages now struggle to increase scores by their states mandated percent. School districts across the country, in naïve attempts to prepare students for state standardized assessments, have begun to rely heavily on literacy programs that promise increased test scores. That is, achievement is defined by test scores. Curriculum is defined as test preparation.

David Berliner warns us of the testing-publishing complex and argues that it is as insidious as the military industrial complex that President Eisenhower warned us about in the 1950's. Berliner points out that it is not uncommon for students to experience between 20 and 60 days of test preparation per year. And test preparation materials have become a thriving business. School districts, anxious to increase test scores, purchase the test preparation materials and substitute those materials for curriculum (and, therefore circumvent state policy that limits test preparation). In some elementary schools, little time is spent on social studies and science so teachers can spend more time on math and reading, the two subject areas tested through NCLB. Individual student progress is often charted through colorful bar graphs and pie charts, leaving students' identities to little more than numbers on a page.

All of these accountability measures cost money and instructional time, thus redefining what it means to teach and learn. For example, the Dynamic Indicators of Early Basic Literacy Skills (DIBELS) provides free assessment materials, but charges $1 for every assessment school districts run through DIBELS servers. In one West Michigan school district, DIBELS, an assessment that uses nonsense syllables and speed to determine a student's phonemic awareness, is now used to sort children into four categories: slow and wrong, fast and wrong, slow and right, fast and right. Another district uses DIBELS as an indicator for determining whether a student is gifted and talented. In many districts countless hours are clocked by para-professionals who remove children from classrooms in order to conduct a DIBELS assessment. Those who do not speed their way through a list of nonsense syllables receive instruction geared to help them decode similar syllables. The materials used for these lessons are not free, but cost precious dollars as well as precious instructional minutes. Additionally, the cost is paid by students—their confidence, creativity, and curiosity are being lost because misguided accountability measures alter for them what it means to be a reader.

Though there are voices that loudly protest the use of standardized assessments and accompanying curricula, teachers often do not hear those voices. And, if they do, they feel powerless to act on the messages those voices speak.

NCLB and standardized testing are only two examples of the effects policy has on students and teachers. To truly understand policy, we must always unearth the assumptions about the nature of reading and writing that affect policy. There, buried in the deep earth of often unexamined beliefs are assumptions about others who may speak a different dialect or approach the world through the lens of different traditions.

The authors in this issue of LAJM take on these themes from a variety of perspectives. Kylene Beers and Robert Probst lead off by juxtaposing two different, if intertwined, standards for understanding our roles as English language arts instructors. One role, shaped by policy-driven standards for performance, declares that students' study of literature should enable them to accomplish intellectual feats such as analyzing and synthesizing information from multiple sources. Another role, driven by thoughtful standards for personal growth and development, counters that students' study of literature should enable them to engage in such caring endeavors as clarifying, valuing, and empathizing with the experiences of their fellow humans.

Bridgette Knudson finds comparable tension between policy and pedagogy, between the standardization of thought and practice to be found in a mandated curriculum, and the independence of thought and curiosity that leads to learning, which may be observed when teachers can teach with autonomy and creativity. The tensions that inevitably result from policy initiatives become palpable and personal as Flint, Anderson, Allen, Campbell, Fraser, Hilaski, James, Rodriguez, and Thornton tell their stories. These teachers accepted considerable personal and professional risk to confront literacy policies and practices that they deemed harmful to children.

In "The Paradox of Power," Risolo acknowledges the increasing power of the federal government in setting policy for education. In such a political climate, Risolo argues, the rightful place of teacher organizations, such as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), is in the midst of the political discourse. The way to influence policy is to ne-

gotiate with policy makers by means of "pragmatic discourse practice marked by flexibility in behavior, tolerance in attitude, and conciseness in message" (p. 23).

Schools must respond to policies that hold them accountable for student performance on high stakes assessment by adopting practices that will assure improved performance on tests such as the Michigan Assessment of Educational Progress (MEAP). Whitford describes a popular approach to reading instruction, READ 180, which seems to conflict with fundamental beliefs about reading. The Michigan State Board of Education's definition of reading as a 'constructive process' leads to instructional practices characterized by student choice, meaningful inquiry, and engaged, interactive learning. READ 180, by contrast, Whitford argues, minimizes choice of text, authenticity of purpose, coherence of message, and interest.

Rogal teaches in a setting also designed to respond to poor student performance on high stakes assessments. In contrast to the setting described by Whitford in which the teacher's role is prescribed and rote, teachers in Rogal's setting have complex roles. The Project-based Learning Academy uses instructional practices that encourage students to inquire in an interdisciplinary fashion to complex questions, select their own texts, share their expertise collaboratively, and develop a product that both synthesizes their learning and enables them to communicate their understandings to others.

Athan found that the multiple, GLCE-based assessments that her school district adopted to "increase instructional focus on GLCE and to improve communication, documentation, and timely intervention for students" were a mixed blessing. While they provided opportunities for collaboration with colleagues teaching at the same grade level, they also produced content that was "rapid-paced, low-level, and easy-to-test" while producing passive students who hated writing. Athens reports how she was able to turn this around to create enthusiastic (even silly) writers by means of writers' notebooks. Somme echoes Athens' sentiments by reminding teachers to carefully examine practices that have long been a part of their culture.

Moving from individual examples of teachers responding to policy documents, Fredrickson provides a broader perspective on the multiple ways educators use standards documents such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) as resources, sometimes in unexpected ways. For example, while standards documents may inform the initial design of a course, teachers also use them once a unit of study is designed to link the goals of the unit to a known body of professional expertise, thus justifying choices made in planning the curriculum.

Finally, in an instructional practice that may parallel educators' responses to policy documents, Shafer shows us how he encourages his students to "use language to probe the networks of discourse around them, learning to question, to deconstruct the status quo, coming to terms with their place in a culture that has given them much of what they believe and revere."

We are confident that you will find this issue of *The Language Arts Journal of Michigan* thought-provoking.

This issue's cover is a Wordle (www.wordle.net) of NCTE's Mission Statement:

> The Council promotes the development of literacy, the use of language to construct personal and public worlds and to achieve full participation in society, through the learning and teaching of English and the related arts and sciences of language.

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