

# History Assessment Newsletter

Oakland Unified School District, Oakland, California

March, 2005

Spring Assessment Support through the OUSD mini-conferences

## March 16

### World History

Topic: Was Indian Independence a Success?

Speaker: Renee Kuriyan, UC Berkeley

## U.S. History

Topic: The Cold War and Vietnam

Speaker: Peter Zinoman, UC Berkeley

## May 18

### 10th-12th Grade Teachers

Topic: The War in Vietnam

Speaker: Daniel Ellsberg

## What's Inside

School by School Administration 2

Student Score Distribution 2

Student Writing—A focus on organization 3

Student Writing—A focus on use of documents 3

Additional Insights and Observations from Scoring Committees 4

## The District History Assessment - Connecting Implementation to Student Writing

We want to thank the many, many people who contributed to the successful implementation of our first district wide writing assessment in history. First, to the committee of teachers who helped develop, pilot, and refine both the assessment and the implementation guidelines. Second, to the teachers who took a day out of their busy teaching schedules to score and provide feedback on the student papers submitted by teachers from across the district. Third, to all of you, Oakland Unified's 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade history teachers, for the work that was essential in getting this important initiative off the ground.

The implementation of the assessment last semester gave life to the Spring, 2004 vote to undertake this work. Through the vote you expressed optimism about the possibility of improving student writing in history. The vote also implied optimism about the possibility of creating a professional community of history teachers focused on enhancing their understanding of how to help students improve their writing.

Crucial to the making this initial implementation meaningful is the feedback both teachers and students receive. The goal of this newsletter and the attached documents is to begin this portion of the work.

The teachers who scored the papers saw much strength in the student work, but as noted on the following page a majority of the papers scored a 2, with all aspects of a paper taken into account. There are, of course, many parts of the student writing to discuss, but the teachers who scored the assessments felt that beginning with a close look at two of the issues would be most productive for teachers and students. Therefore, the focus of this first newsletter is on two critical areas of student writing, as identified in our scoring sessions - thesis and organization, as they connect to each other, and use of documents.

Page 3 of the newsletter details some of the common organizational problems we saw in students' papers who scored a 2, and some of the common problems students had when trying to integrate evidence gathered from the source documents into their essays. Attached to the newsletter are two types of handouts, along with overheads, that may be used with students. The first includes examples of effective and ineffective thesis and use of documents, with commentary, for both 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade students. The second includes examples of papers, with commentary, that illustrate a 4, 3, 2, and 1 paper.

We hope you find this newsletter and the accompanying documents informative and useful. Please let us know if you have any questions or comments or suggestions, or if you would like to participate in developing and scoring future assessments.

- Shelly Weintraub and Stan Pesick

## Spring 2005 Assessment Questions

### World History

Was Indian independence a success? In answering this question consider economic, social and political factors.

### U.S. History

What were the most important reasons the nation, between 1963 and 1972, became increasingly divided over the war in Vietnam? Include differences over war aims and goals, the impact on the home front, and what was happening to the military in Vietnam.

### School by School Implementation

school	#10th and 11th grade teachers	# teachers administering assessment	% teachers administering assessment
<b>District Scoring Committees</b>			
Castlemont Community			
• <i>Busintess and Info Tech</i>	2	1	50
• <i>School of the Arts</i>	2	1	50
• <i>Leadership Prep</i>	2	1	50
<b>10th Grade:</b>			
• Sharon Butler, Oakland Tech			
Fremont Federation			
• Gordon Danning, Oakland High			
• <i>Architecture</i>	1	1	100
• Grace Dearborn, Skyline			
• <i>Mandela</i>	2	2	100
• Tsering Kheyap, YES			
• <i>Media</i>	2	1	100
• Daniel Mansky, Independent Study			
• <i>Robeson</i>	2	2	100
• Rebecca Wieder, Oakland Tech			
Life Academemy	3	0	0
Metwest*	4	0	0
<b>11th Grade</b>			
McClymonds	4	2	50
• Deborah Gordon, Independent Study			
Oakland High	8	7	88
• Elizabeth Haugen, Oakland Tech			
Oakland Tech	7	7	100
• Carl Keys, Skyline			
Skyline	10	7	70
• Ed Mestre, Dewey			
Independent Study	8	8	100
• Marion Murphy, Skyline			
Youth Empowerment	1	1	100
• Ron Wakefield, Skyline			
<b>District Totals</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>71%</b>

\*Metwest will participate in the spring assessment.

• William Wong, Oakland High

### Score Distribution of Submitted Papers (6 per class)

Grade /# Score & %	4	3	2	1
10th(118 papers scored)	3 (3%)	24 (20%)	55 (47%)	36 (30%)
11th(125 papers scored)	9 (7%)	27 (22%)	65 (52%)	24 (19%)

## Student Writing—A Focus on Thesis and Organization

One of the clearest issues to emerge from our examination of student work was the difficulty students had in developing a thesis statement and having a strong opening paragraph. Under “Thesis” the rubric asks that students address the prompt and “have a map of the argument”. While we found that almost all students did take a stand, very few provided a “map of the argument”. As a result, many students had trouble with organization. There is a vast difference between students who essentially used the first paragraph to simply state a position, and others who used it to frame and outline their essay. Typically, a weak essay would have an introductory paragraph that would read, “Was American expansion ever justified in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries or even today? I don’t think it was. America tried to push there (sic) ways onto others and that is never justified. I will prove this with the facts I have gathered to show you this.” While this student takes a strong moral stance, he doesn’t outline why this expansion wasn’t justified. As a result of this the student has difficulty in developing the argument throughout the essay. Thus, the paper that follows lacks a coherent organization.

Many students could make a vast improvement in their essays if they followed the traditional five paragraph essay model in which students use the opening paragraph to not only state their thesis, but also provide several reasons to support their thesis that will be further developed in the body of the essay. This organization, while it can be stifling, might reduce the number of papers that lacked not only a thesis and a strong introductory paragraph, but also lacked topic sentences and a coherent argument.

Finally, when students weren’t clear about the major points of their argument they tended to confuse big ideas with specific pieces of evidence. Thus, for example, many opening paragraphs started with an assertion followed by a quote from a source document. An student who starts with this organizational structure has a difficult time mapping out the essay in the introductory paragraph and developing a coherent argument throughout the body of the essay.

To help improve students’ ability to write a strong first paragraph we have attached several examples of strong and weak papers that you can use with your students. They can compare them and see how some papers incorporate a thesis which helps both the reader and the writer make sense of the material.

## Student Writing—A Focus on the Use of Documents

This assessment asked students to “effectively” use the source documents to support their historical argument. The key question here is, “what does it mean to effectively use a document?” Most important to success on these assessments, effective use means that the documents provide evidence to support the thesis. But a successful paper is more than just giving back what the sources say. Indeed, the sources should not dominate the paper, but should serve to back up what the author knows and says about the topic; weaving together the outside knowledge and evidence from the documents. Many of the papers that received an overall score of two were constructed solely of the student working their way through the documents and extensively quoting from the ones that they determined supported the thesis. Each paragraph would begin with a statement such as, “In document #-\_\_\_\_\_ the writer says...,” or a statement such as “Source #\_\_\_\_\_ supports my belief because...” Neither of these opening statements, which lead to long quotes or summaries, is a strong use of evidence to support an argument.

Ideally, a student should understand that an historical source does not speak for itself, it has to be interpreted. This means asking such questions about the document as, “Who wrote it?” “Where, when, and why was it written or created?” “Who was the intended audience?” Examples of this type of thinking were apparent in a number of the assessments that received higher scores, 3 or 4. A few examples. When one student suggested that McKinley’s rationale for annexing the Philippines was “propaganda” designed to deflect the real economic reasons she made good use of her questions about the source, “Who wrote and why?” “For who was it created?” (continued on page 4)

Additionally, an effective use of sources can also mean using a document to corroborate, or contradict, another document. For example, when a student connected, in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade assessment, the two sources that discussed the damage western education was doing to traditional African society he was corroborating this evidence, while at the same time building a stronger argument in support of his thesis.

A more in depth analysis of how students worked with the evidence is included in this packet. We encourage you to use this analysis, along with the examples from students essays, with your students as you help students prepare for future writing assignments and the spring assessment.

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### **Looking Ahead: Additional Insights and Observations from Scoring Committees**

Due to space limitations we are unable, at this time, to fully develop all that the committee noticed in reading and analyzing the student papers. However, below in list form, are key points, some specific to the assessments and some general, that arose as the committee discussed the student work. The scoring committees believed that working with students on these areas would lead to improved student understanding and writing.

1. Students need to use more outside knowledge in their papers and not simply depend on the documents.
2. Students should not use language such as “This quote proves...” No quote proves anything. Rather, they should use language such as, “The author of this quote suggests...” or “This quote supports...”
3. Some students thought Africa was a country, not a continent.
4. Some students were under that impression that prior to European imperialism life in Africa was without difficulty.

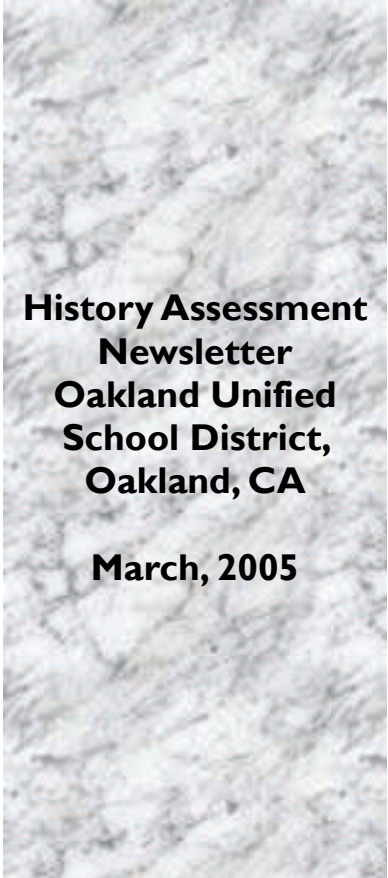
The scoring committees also looked at the assessment itself and suggested future revisions. Below are some of their recommendations.

1. There should be fewer documents. Both as a time issue, and to encourage students to rely more heavily on information learned in class.
2. Students should be told explicitly the need to include information learned in class.
3. Pay closer attention to how the prompts are worded. A number of teachers observed that students had difficulty with the term “justified” in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade prompt.
4. A “kid friendly” rubric should be created for use with students in class.
5. Possibly revise the rubric to a five point scale.

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### **History Assessment Development and Advisory Committee**

- Patricia Arabia—Mandela High School
- Richard Charlesworth—McClymonds
- Gordon Danning—Oakland High School
- Craig Gordon—Mandela High School
- Elizabeth Haugen—Oakland Tech
- Jack Herman— Castlemont Business and Information Technology School
- Marietta Joe—Oakland Tech
- Jim Richter—Skyline High School
- Victor Wilson—Skyline High School
- Maryann Wolfe—Oakland Tech
- Jonas Zuckerman—Oakland Tech



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Newsletter  
Oakland Unified  
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