

OUSD History Assessment Newsletter

Volume VI, Number I

Oakland Unified School District, Oakland, California

February, 2009

Assessment News and Notes

Spring 2008 Assessment Questions

World History

How successful was Mao Zedong, beginning with the Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949 until his death in 1976, in moving China towards a better society? In answering the question, consider the political, social and economic factors.

U.S. History

How successful were the "Great Society" programs and policies of President Lyndon Johnson? By 1972 had America become a "great", "almost great", or "not so great" society?

This year's district-wide history assessment is off to a great start. Ninety percent of 10th and 11th grade district history teachers implemented the assessment in their classrooms – an incredibly strong showing on the part of the district's history community! In addition, twenty-eight of the teachers who gave the assessment gathered on Saturday, January 31, to score and discuss the student papers.

Most importantly, we are starting to see significant improvement in the students' historical writing. When we began scoring these assessments two years ago, we regularly saw that most of the students scored below a "3" (on the district's five point rubric), failing to meet standards at both the 10th and 11th grade. However, on the last two assessments, Spring '08 and Fall '08, a majority of the 11th grade papers scored at a "3" or above. While it's still too early to tell if this trend will continue, it is incredibly encouraging to see that as teachers instruct students in how to develop the type of essay required on this assessment, and as students become more familiar with what is expected, their ability to write an historical essay improves.

This fall, in order to support a continuing pattern of teacher participation and student growth, a one-day training on the assessment was held for history teachers new to the district. At this training the new teachers were not only provided the rationale for the assessment and logistics of how to give the exam, but they also had the opportunity to look closely at student work through a sample scoring session and to hear from colleagues about instructional practices that support student success on the assessment.

At this meeting with new teachers we stressed an idea that is familiar to district teachers who have worked with the assessment over the past three years — that the assessment is meant as a tool, not for the sake of accountability, but to give all of us a better sense of what needs to be done to improve instruction for our students. Our hope is that the assessment helps build a district-wide history community that clearly demonstrates that the study of history is important to the development of informed citizens and to the development of student literacy skills necessary for success in college and in the world at large.

- Shelly Weintraub and Stan Pesick

Spring Assessment Support : OUSD Mini- Conferences

Wednesday, April 2
2:30—4:00
Oakland Technical High
School

World History

Topic:
The Chinese Revolution

U.S. History

Topic:
The Great Society

Notes from the Scoring Session

Twenty-eight teachers, pens and rubrics in hand, read student assessment papers from classrooms across the district on Saturday morning, January 31st. Throughout their reading of the student papers teachers paid close attention to, and tried to answer, three questions:

1. Are there any patterns of student misperceptions that you notice?
2. What additional content knowledge and/or concepts would be helpful for students to know in order to write more successful essays? What patterns do you see?
3. What do you notice about the quality of the student writing? (Both strengths and weaknesses)

A summary of teacher answers to these questions begins on page 3.

District Scoring Committee

Patricia Arabia, Mandela
 Christie Blakely, Architecture
 Aryn Bowman, EOSA
 Richard Charlesworth, BEST
 Gordon Danning, Oakland High
 Dianne Denmann, Independent Study
 Dionne Embry, Rudsdale
 Deborah Gordon, Adult Ed
 Kita Grinberg, Dewey
 Craig Gordon, Robeson
 Anya Gurholt, Skyline
 Elizabeth Haugen, Oakland Tech
 Michael Jackson, Media
 Tania Kappner, Oakland Tech
 Michael Lee, EOSA
 Emily Macy, Oakland High
 Thea Marston, Architecture
 Andrew Odegels, Adult Ed
 Harry Pasternak, Oakland Tech
 Stan Pesick, OUSD
 Jesse Shapiro, Oakland High
 Joyce Snow, Independent Study
 Theresa Stinson, Independent Study
 Isabel Toscano, CBITS
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 Shelly Weintraub, OUSD
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Please contact Shelly Weintraub or Stan Pesick if you have questions, or for more information about the assessments and related professional development.

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School by School Implementation (Fall Semester, 2008—09)

school	#10th and 11th grade teachers	# teachers administering assessment	% teachers administering assessment
Castlemont Community			
• Business and Info Tech	2	2	100
• EOSA	2	1	50
• Leadership Prep	2	2	100
Dewey	2	1	50
Farwest	2	2	100
Fremont Federation			
• Architecture	2	2	100
• Mandela	2	2	100
• Media	2	2	100
• Robeson	2	2	100
Life Academy	3	3	100
Metwest	4	2	50
McClymonds Community			
• BEST	1	1	100
• EXCEL	3	2	67
Oakland High	8	8	100
Oakland Tech	9	8	89
Rudsdale	1	1	100
Skyline	11	11	100
Independent Study	4	4	100
Youth Empowerment (YES)	2	2	100
District Totals	64	58	91

Score Distribution of Submitted Papers - Fall Semester, 2008—2009 (6 per class)*

Grade/Score (%)		5	4	3	2	1
10th Grade**	Fall semester - # scored and % of total (150) papers scored	0 (0%)	10 (6.7%)	18 (12%)	84 (56%)	38 (25.3%)
11th Grade**	Fall semester—# scored and % of total (160) papers scored	1 (.6%)	24 (15%)	65 (41%)	64 (40%)	6 (3.4%)

* Papers were scored using a five point rubric, with a score of “5” being the highest possible score and a score of “1” the lowest. The district rubric assesses students’ ability to write a coherent and well organized historical essay that includes thoughtful a thesis supported by historical knowledge learned in class and analysis of source documents included on the assessment.

** These scores include student papers written during the first semester assessment window. Students in Advanced Placement history classes, due to pacing differences tied to the content of the AP exams, have not yet written to the fall assessment questions. Their scores will be included in our comparison of fall and spring scoring to be distributed at the start of the 2009-2010 school year.

Notes from the Scoring Session (cont.)

10th Grade World History

Assessment Question: Considering the goals of liberty and equality, were the gains of the French Revolution worth the pain that was caused from 1789-1804?

Patterns of Misperceptions

There were two broad areas of student misperceptions noted on student papers. The first was that students were weak at “sourcing” the documents. They, for the most part, failed to consider who produced each of the documents, why they were produced, and what kinds of responses the document may have provoked. Many didn’t, for example, notice that while a woman may have written a Declaration of the Rights of Women, she was also guillotined for this effort. Additionally, many of the students worked with the primary sources as if each represented a particular “truth,” rather than as a perspective or idea to be questioned.

Secondly, many students did not, in their work, show an understanding of how the historical idea of “change over time” impacted their response to the question. They seemed confused about the chronology of the French Revolution and therefore had difficulty in knowing what was actually gained and what was lost. For example, many students noticed that slavery was abolished early in the revolution, but failed to notice it was reinstated later on.

Content knowledge

Many students, in arguing that “the pain was not worth the gain” of the French Revolution said something to the effect of “people were killed for no reason at all.” This kind of generality led us to believe that those students didn’t really understand what was behind the killings – either during the initial stages of the Revolution, or later during the Reign of Terror. That lack of knowledge made it more difficult for the students to make a compelling argument for either side of the question. Finally, it was suggested that if students had a more in-depth understanding of Napoleon, and his connection to the Revolution, they would have been able to develop a wider range of arguments in answer to the question.

Student Writing

As learned from assessment scoring sessions, students have difficulty taking what they have learned in class and weaving it into an essay where documents are provided. Students seem able to either use the documents, or tell a narrative of the French Revolution, but combining both is difficult for them. Weaving the two together is an important skill because it means students are able to complete a fundamental academic literacy task—make a claim, provide background to the claim, and then support it with evidence. Below are three additional observations.

- 1) Students have difficulty in working with counter evidence, they don’t often acknowledge something that counters their argument and then explain why the counter evidence is either not important or wrong.
- 2) Many students did have topic sentences, which made it difficult for them to develop coherent body paragraphs.
- 3) Students need to be explicitly taught how to make inferences from the primary source documents if they are to do a better job of analyzing and using those documents when they write.

11th Grade U.S. History

Assessment Question: How successful were Progressive Era reformers, from 1900 – 1920, in making America a freer and more humane society?

Patterns of Misperceptions

One significant misperception of many 11th grade students was their failure, in their evaluation, to separate intention from achievement. The assessment prompt asked students to evaluate the success of the Progressive movement in the early 20th century. Many, in reading a document, assumed that because Progressives demanded a particular change, the change was achieved. The students also failed to understand the importance of having categories that help them think about the Progressive Era in multiple ways. Many noted that women achieved the right to vote during this time and concluded that the Progressive movement was successful in making America a more human and freer place for women. But many didn’t consider that while women may have achieved their political aims, they may not have made advancements socially or economically. Teachers noted the importance of this distinction in helping students better understand later periods of American history. Why would there be a Women’s Liberation movement in the 60’s if the problems were solved in the twenties?

Finally, many students didn’t articulate a criteria for what would make a freer and more humane society. Having an articulated criteria is essential in writing an evaluative essay. For example, if a student argued that in a “humane”
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Notes from the Scoring Session (cont.)

society children don't work in mines, but attend school, he or she could have used that criteria to evaluate the Progressives' achievements more thoughtfully. If these criteria had been more carefully articulated, the essays would have been stronger.

Content Knowledge

Teachers felt that they need to teach more about Jim Crow and segregation for students to understand racial divisions in the country at that time. They noted that students, in the study of history, need to understand the power of omission, in particular to understand that that white Progressives did not focus on issues of racial discrimination and violence as part of their reform agenda. Ensuring that students understand the impact of Jim Crow laws and segregation would help mitigate this issue.

Additionally, a better understanding of the role of trusts and of the role of Theodore Roosevelt in breaking trusts would have enhanced the students' papers. This is complex topic that requires some in-depth instruction if students are to understand its importance to understanding the Progressive Era.

Finally, students need to understand that the Supreme Court can overturn previous rulings and that new rulings reflect new ways of thinking about the role of government during a particular time period. This understanding would have helped the students make better use of the two court cases they were asked to consider— *Lockner v. New York* (1905) and *Bunting v. Oregon* (1917).

Writing

Teachers were generally pleased with the improved organizational skills exhibited by 11th graders. They noted that this represented significant progress over previous years. However, there were still areas of concern that require an instructional response. Two specifics:

- Many of the student papers did not include essential and relevant historical content
- Like 10th grade students, 11th grade students had a difficult time weaving together what they learned in class with the source documents as they developed their arguments.

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