
KALISPELL PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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December 27, 2003

Montana Board of Regents
2500 Broadway
Helena, MT 59620

Dear Regents:

I would like to add my voice in support of the continuation of the OCHE writing assessment. Flathead High School has participated in the pilot of the Montana University System admissions writing assessment since its inception. Participation in this project has been valuable to both students and teachers as well as to the development of our writing program as a whole.

One of the strongest reasons for continuation of the writing assessment is the alternative it provides to students seeking admission to the Montana University System. Because the timed format is longer than either the new SAT or ACT writing sample, it better mirrors the writing that students most commonly do both in high school and in college. Montana is a strong "writing as process" state, and to provide very short timings for writing samples (as is the case with the SAT and ACT new formats) does not validate the importance of all of the stages of writing. Because the type of writing students most often do in our classes emphasizes the importance of all of the stages of writing, the OCHE writing assessment will most likely provide you with a more accurate picture of students' writing abilities.

The OCHE writing assessment has also been valuable as a means of better training teachers throughout Montana in the important qualities of good writing. Using holistic scoring which is based on the traits of quality writing, the OCHE writing assessment scoring sessions have offered teachers an excellent opportunity for professional development in both teaching and assessing writing. Flathead High School has now had nearly a dozen different English teachers participate in the scoring sessions. Without exception, the teachers reported that the sessions provided high quality training and an opportunity to discuss the importance of the various qualities of writing with colleagues from around the state and from the university level. This training and professional discussion translates into better classroom instruction and therefore students who are better prepared for the demands of college level writing. Staying in touch with our colleagues who teach at the university level is an important function of the OCHE writing assessment.

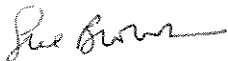
Finally, the OCHE writing assessment should be continued because of the impact that it has on curriculum. For a variety of reasons, secondary writing programs often focus on creative and expository writing to the exclusion of more complex types of writing such as persuasive, argumentative and analytic writing. Knowing that students' admissions to our own universities

will require them to demonstrate mastery of these more complex thought and writing processes strengthens our efforts at the district levels to enhance the writing curriculum. In our own district, changes have been made in the curriculum and supporting materials acquisitions in order to better meet the needs of students as reflected on the OCHE writing assessment. The OCHE writing assessment has already impacted curriculum and instruction at Flathead High School. Actual implementation of the OCHE writing assessment requirements would predictably continue to enhance our high school writing instruction throughout the state.

The role of the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education in the development and continuation of a Montana Writing Assessment is critical. While we have a variety of other vehicles to continue to administer and score the writing assessments, none of them have the stability and professional qualities that OCHE provides to this process. Our professional associations and the regional curriculum cooperatives are often too political or change leadership too often to be the main vehicles for administering and coordinating this type of assessment. While no plan is perfect, I would certainly encourage OCHE to continue to have administrative oversight of the assessment. The leadership provided by Jan Clinard and the OCHE support staff has already proven itself invaluable in the pilot stage of this assessment.

As a teacher and English department head at Flathead High School, I am grateful for the opportunities already created for Montana teachers and students by the pilot project with the Montana Writing Assessment. I encourage you to continue your support of this project and to implement it as one of the options for students to demonstrate writing proficiency as part of their admission process to the Montana University System.

Sincerely,



Sue Brown
English Teacher and Department Chair
Flathead High School
644 4th Ave. West
Kalispell, MT 59901
406-751-3501 voice
browns@sd5.k12.mt.us

P.O. Box 272
Hysham, MT 59038
December 19, 2003

Montana Board of Regents
2500 Broadway
Helena, MT 59620

Dear Montana Board of Regents:

As a teacher in a small school in rural Montana, I write to express my support in Montana's writing assessment with fiscal support from you. This assessment has been one of the most valuable experiences I have had as a teacher of writing, and your support would insure that the endeavor continues and benefits all Montana's students.

When I applied in Hysham thirteen years ago, the superintendent told me that the school was looking for someone who would place an emphasis on writing. A graduate of The University of Montana, I felt capable of doing such, and in the middle and high school, writing is, and has been, the backbone of my curriculum at Hysham School. It is the most important skill students learn; it fosters thinking – analytical, creative, and reflective. It gives students a communication outlet and moves across all curriculums. Unfortunately, until the Montana Writing Assessment, my students did not always see the importance in developing their skills beyond what was necessary in the English room. With the imminence of an exam where they can prove themselves (and a recognition that it is not just their English teacher who thinks that writing is important), students have shown more interest and commitment to learning how to better their abilities. The assessment gives validity to writing, and students prosper because of that.

Additionally, the project has become important to Hysham students. My students improved greatly during the second year of the project (a testimony to those who trained me!), and they are more engaged in the writing process. Using prompts has become a standard practice for us, and many students have come to prefer this kind of testing. Numerous HHS graduates from all varieties of Montana's higher education options have come back to tell me that they were well-prepared for their courses because of their writing background. The writing assessment makes a school's writing program more effective.

Since the beginning of this project, Hysham has been on board because the administration saw the value in any effort that will have kids put pen to paper. Through training sessions, I have become a better teacher and renewed my enthusiasm in writing. All citizens need to be able to write, and high school is the time for students become proficient at this task. The Montana Writing Assessment, a collaborative effort between the academic world of college and the practical realm of high school, provides the structure to insure that good instruction happens at this level and has worth for all students and their writing teachers.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Glenda Skillen-Robison". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Glenda Skillen-Robison
Teacher, Hysham High School



GREAT FALLS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

1100 4th Street South
P. O. Box 2429
Great Falls, Montana 59403
(406) 268-6000

Montana Board of Regents
2500 Broadway
Helena, MT 59620

December 22, 2003

Dear Board of Regents:

I am writing to let you know about the value the writing assessment field test has had on teachers and students. Great Falls Public Schools has seen many benefits from the process, which has provided excellent staff development and conversation among Montana high schools and with post-secondary faculty.

Probably the biggest benefit of the writing assessment is the training the teachers receive in the assessment process. By using trained ACT assessment personnel, school districts can see how professionals run a writing assessment and apply the techniques to their districts and within their own individual classrooms. The teachers learn how to align to a rubric, how to do blind readings and how to handle problem essays. In addition, they are able to see essays from around the state from a variety of schools: from AA schools to class C to schools with a high American Indian population.

Along with the actual assessing of essays, the teachers worked alongside colleagues from around the state and from higher education. Perhaps for the first time, many teachers had the opportunity to ask professors about the expectations at a college level, what the university instructors felt was important in essay writing, and how college personnel graded writing. The Montana assessment included middle-school teachers, literacy and technology staff in addition to communication arts and English teachers, further developing dialogue across the curricular areas.

Another benefit of the Montana/ACT writing assessment is that teachers now have a target for which to aim with the development of a common rubric, or scoring guide. This scoring guide closely resembles the rubric that ACT and SAT will be using starting next year, so the assessment gives the students and teachers a trial run at the college admissions tests.

Because the process has been so beneficial and it would be nice to continue the dialogue to more teachers and new instructors as they come on board, I would like to see the process continue with its professional development. To keep the process viable,

especially if some districts want to form consortiums, it is imperative that some funding and central control be provided to help with the process. Districts cannot afford to absorb all the costs of training and scoring on their own.

I hope the regents will seriously consider funding the writing project so more teachers, students and professors can benefit from the assessing process and better prepare our students for writing beyond the high-school years.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Katie Myers". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "K".

Katie Myers
Assessment Specialist, Great Falls Public Schools

Centerville High School
693 Stockett Road
Sand Coulee, MT 59472
December 29, 2003

Board of Regents
2500 Broadway
Helena, MT 59620

Dear Board of Regents:

As a teacher of English/Writing for the past thirteen years at Centerville High School, I have seen the need for support and direction from not only the state of Montana but also the institutions of higher education to help prepare our students for the world they soon face as they leave high school. Personally, I have struggled with how to teach my students to see the relevancy of their writing. Often, high school students do not understand the necessity of writing clearly as a means of communicating effectively. They struggle to put their thoughts to paper in a clear, concise manner. They question why they must write to argue persuasively. But, unfortunately, they understand the need to pass tests to succeed.

Centerville has been involved in the field test of writing proficiency since its inception in 2001. Because this test has been developed and tested with not only the involvement of high schools but also the university system, invaluable results have already been seen. This has given me help in directing my instruction to align with all the partners in the education process. A valuable outcome of this is that we are all speaking the same language now when it comes to the writing process. All of us in the field now know what is expected from our university partners when they receive our students. We understand the prompt structure and how to score based on a holistic rubric. We are assured that the prompts have been developed for Montana students and reflect the Montana Content Standards for Writing. Programs such as WebWriters have been added to help our students improve and evaluate their writing using other teachers as coaches and mentors. Most importantly, the cost to the students for this writing assessment is nil; for many students this could be a deciding factor in whether to attend college or not.

Please consider carefully the ramifications of eliminating this valuable tool from our schools. The positive aspects of this program far outweigh any negative concerns. Thank you for your foresight and concern for our students.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Joyce Damm". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Joyce Damm, Teacher

Granite High School - Philipsburg Elementary School

Philipsburg, Montana 59858

MIKE CUTLER
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Montana Board of Regents
2500 Broadway
Helena, MT 59620
December 21, 2003

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing this letter in support of the continuation of the writing assessment program in Montana. I have been a high school English teacher since 1973, and this is the best program initiated in Montana for writing during my tenure. At the moment, I am officially retired, although I am presently teaching a college composition class at Granite High School in Philipsburg. This college class, offered for dual credit by the University of Montana-Helena has proven to me once again the importance of writing proficiency.

The advantages are numerous for schools, teachers, and most importantly, students who participate in the programs for writing proficiency offered through the Montana Office of Public Instruction. As a teacher, the Webwriters program has been very beneficial, redirecting the way I teach writing. Knowing the scoring rubric which will be used by the ACT and SAT exams is a great way of focusing on necessary skills. The training I received as a scorer using this rubric has also been highly useful. Even though writing has always been stressed in our school, this program has enforced the six traits writing program adopted by our school in the past few years.

For students, knowing where they stand with their writing skills is very useful. When they send in an essay to webwriters and then get comments and scores from other teachers, that reinforces comments made by their classroom teacher which they may not have taken seriously. It is a good support system for all involved. Those students who may need extra attention with writing may also ask for a web coach to help with writing assignments during the year. If a student does not have access to quality instruction for writing, this could prove extremely important as he or she prepares for a college career.

In November, I attended a meeting with many college professors of Freshman composition, and the feeling there was that students were better prepared this year than they have been in the past. Maybe that is just coincidence. I feel certain, however, that the Writing Proficiency Admissions Standards Initiative is a good part of that improvement.

I ask that you, the Board of Regents of Montana, please consider the continuation of this initiative, and that you give the fiscal support necessary to enable that continuation. Montana students will be more prepared for taking standardized exams like the ACT and the SAT, but more importantly, Montana students will be more prepared for college and the work force.

Sincerely,



Marilyn Todorovich

401 South Wyoming
Butte, MT 59701
December 19, 2003

Montana Board of Regents
2500 Broadway
Helena, MT 59620

Dear Board of Regents:

I urge you to continue the use of the Montana Writing Assessment as a tool for high school students to use as a college entrance writing proficiency test. This assessment has been invaluable to instructors in Montana's high schools since 2001, and it is my thought that such an educational tool should not be discontinued.

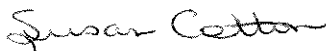
This writing assessment, which is administered to Montana high school juniors, is a way for the students to write and express their thoughts on a given topic. It allows instructors to score the essays and determine weak areas in the student's writing process and address those areas. Through the writing, scoring, and teaching processes, the students are better able to express their ideas in an appropriate format that allows all participants to be scored fairly. It is a non-discriminating tool available to all Montana high schools with topics appropriate for Montana students.

Without the testing and remedial teaching which it allows, students are admitted to college without the requisite writing skills necessary to truly demonstrate their thinking skills. The scoring rubric that has been created allows all students to strive to reach their desired mark and to be able to compare their scored essay to the rubric and determine where changes need to be made for improvement.

As a Montana English teacher and a Writing Proficiency scoring person, I know the value of the writing assessment. My students work hard during the school year addressing their difficulty with putting their thoughts and ideas on paper. This tool gives them what they need to work diligently and achieve their writing goals. They are able to compare the writing rubric with scored examples. They are then able to write an essay and compare that piece to the rubric and examples. This process allows them to improve both their thought process and their writing process. I would be devastated to see this tool taken from us. It aligns writing instruction in the classroom with the assessment across all educational levels.

I believe that the Montana Writing Assessment is a valuable way to test the writing proficiency of Montana students. I urge you to fund this assessment and to continue its use.

Respectfully,



Susan Cotton



HELENA HIGH SCHOOL

1300 BILLINGS AVE.
HELENA, MONTANA 59601-3981

Montana Board of Regents
2500 Broadway
Helena, MT 59620

Dear Montana Board of Regents:

You have before you a proposal to continue funding the Montana Writing Assessment through the Writing Assessment Consortium, administered through OCHE. I would be gratified if you would read my letter addressing this subject.

Good writing takes time and practice to develop. So also does the teaching of good writing. As a teacher of English in Montana schools, both rural and urban, for most of my 22 year career teaching, I can attest that writing instruction does not come easily. To really understand how to help students achieve control over their own writing takes skill, practice, and knowledge of the whole process of writing. I have been involved in the Montana Writing Assessment for the past three years, meeting with teachers in Helena, Billings, and Bozeman to score papers of high school juniors with a holistic point system for the Montana Writing Assessment. The process has helped me to be a better teacher, raised standards of writing for students, and resulted in an important dialogue among educators about writing. The Montana Writing Assessment can serve effectively as an entrance test for the Montana University System, providing more benefits than relying on the ACT or SAT tests as standards of measurement. Rather than let this valuable program die, there are many reasons why the Board of Regents should fund the ongoing Montana Writing Assessment as proposed through the Montana Writing Assessment Consortium, to be administered through OCHE.

How could scoring papers of juniors help me, a teacher of freshmen and sophomores, become a better teacher? The Montana Writing Assessment has been based on persuasive prompts, measurable and accessible to all students regardless of their background. I have had to recognize the importance of persuasive writing for my students and develop ways to instruct them in it. As a tool to help myself and other teachers I developed the web page referenced below along with Kathleen Prody, currently Department Chair of English at Helena High School. I have guided my sophomores through two persuasive research papers annually. I am confident that when my sophomores reach the junior level they will understand much about developing a multi-paragraph, focused persuasive piece that will help them to do well on this writing assessment.

At the scoring sessions for the Montana Writing Assessment, each teacher must go through a rigorous calibration, until the teacher can recognize the value of a student paper with a high degree of accuracy. This process results in a beneficial dialogue about writing, comparing the Six Traits commonly used by teachers K-12 in Montana to the holistic rubric or single point system of the Writing Assessment. The holistic approach more nearly approximates the evaluation students will receive in college by their professors. The dialogue goes on when teachers return to the classrooms, sharing their knowledge and

understanding, working together to raise expectations for student writing. This professional dialogue focusing on the importance of writing is one of the most beneficial outcomes of the Montana Writing Assessment.

Students exposed to quality writing instruction respond with improved products. They understand and use effectively the levels of the writing process: prewrite, draft, revision, and final copy stages. They critique and make suggestions for other students. They take seriously the importance of being good writers, both for higher education and for acquiring life-long skills. I will suggest that as great examples of student writing, try viewing the literary publication of Helena High, *Writings on the Wall*, or reading the admirable student newspaper, *The Nugget*. On the state level *Signatures from Big Sky* is a treasure of poetry and prose. As an alternative, read some of the amazing hero stories on the web pages my students create, at the link given below. In short, students engage in the Montana Standards for Writing by writing clearly and effectively, applying a range of skills and strategies to their writing, writing for a variety of purposes, and reflecting on their success as writers. Validating this process through the Montana Writing Assessment, a tangible sign of the importance of good writing, helps students relate to the vital function writing will certainly play in their higher education and life-long skills.

Looked at this way, the Montana Writing Assessment, which surely could not cost our state that much to administer, is a highly effective, low-cost method of providing professional development to hundreds of teachers and raising the writing ability of their thousands of students. Montana needs to continue to fund this valuable source of professional growth and student achievement. The dialogue between teachers as students prepare to do the Montana Writing Assessment, take the test, and then receive their scores, results in writing raised to a new level of importance and value. In future, prompts can be made more flexible and creative, through the on-going work of educators. In addition, the Montana Writing Assessment offers feedback to local districts, providing a reliable measure of growth in writing. Our students go on to college well-prepared and able, in part due to the higher degree of instruction given to them by knowledgeable teachers. The Montana Writing Assessment can function effectively as an entrance level test for the Montana University system, offering an alternative to the SAT and the ACT tests, while providing these benefits. We can ill afford to let this valuable resource go unattended. I urge you to continue to fund the Montana Writing Assessment.

Sincerely,



Jean O'Connor

English teacher, Helena High School

Vice-President of MATELA (Montana Association of Teachers of English and Language Arts)

Persuasive Writing, Speaking, and Activities

<http://www.hhs.helena.k12.mt.us/Teacherlinks/OConnorj/persuasion.html>

Hero Quests

<http://www.hhs.helena.k12.mt.us/Teacherlinks/OConnorj/classquests.html>

Chinook High School

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December 26, 2003

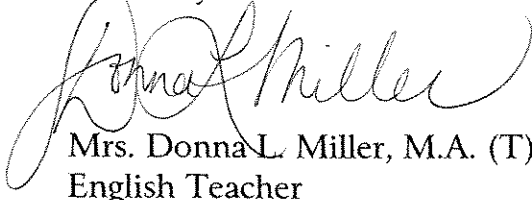
Dear Board of Regents Members:

Please consider this letter in support of continued funding for the Montana University System's Writing Assessment. Continuation of support would recognize the importance of writing proficiency for Montana's students.

Perhaps one of the most valued aspects of the work already done during the field testing process is the opportunity for teachers across the state to dialogue about writing skills, assessment strategies, and teaching tips that have proven their effectiveness. Such interaction will contribute its role in closing the achievement gap. Many students can testify that knowing they will be required to prove their writing skills has inspired them to improve as writers. As you look at the funding obstacle, don't be penny wise and pound foolish by neglecting the long term benefits of such transformations or of the valuable interaction of a community of teachers who reach students.

Finally, we need to maintain local control of the testing process. Why should big test companies get rich at our students' expense? A State developed, administered, and scored examination will do much more in the way of professional development for teachers who can use the information they gain to improve writing instruction in the classrooms across the State. We must not lose such an important opportunity.

Sincerely,



Mrs. Donna L. Miller, M.A. (T)
English Teacher

23 December 2003

Montana Board of Regents
2500 Broadway
Helena, MT 59620

To the Board of Regents:

This letter is written in support of the continuation of the Montana Writing Assessment Project that began in 2000.

Our school district is committed to using "Assessment for Learning". With the extensive work that went into the pilot field testing, local school districts that participated have been well grounded in the whole assessment process having experience in designing prompts, test administration, rubric design and adjustment, and most importantly the scoring of student work. Most teachers who have had experience scoring student work using Six Traits of Writing or the ACT rubric or the combination of the two, declare that the scoring experience provides them with crucial knowledge to return to the classroom and use that assessment for student involvement in their own work. The assessment becomes a learning tool, an opportunity for reflection, and the basis of self-guided improvement. Having prompts that connect to Montana Content Standards and regional material gives students opportunities to draw upon their knowledge and understandings while exhibiting writing skills and strategies.

The establishment of the Montana Writing Assessment Consortium with an oversight component provides the necessary collaboration between higher education and the k-12 programs that must be recognized and included in college proficiency requirement discussions. With added federal pressures, consideration must still emphasize grassroots programs that grow up rather than a top down emphasis that mandates reform.

Continued local funding burdens such as teacher and administrator time, travel for workshops, training, and scoring may influence whether local schools can continue to participate in this valuable work.

Sincerely,



Bobbie Barrett
Curriculum Director
Whitefish Public Schools

Clinard, Jan

From: Bill & Cathy Frye [abcfrye@midrivers.com]
Sent: Saturday, December 27, 2003 1:55 PM
To: Clinard, Jan
Subject: writing assessment support letter

December 27, 2003

Montana Board of Regents
2500 Broadway
Helena, MT 59620

Dear Montana Board of Regents:

I am writing to request your continued support of the Montana Writing Assessment. Our school has been involved with the writing proficiency field test since its inception in 2001. I feel it has helped me as a teacher better prepare my students for the type of testing they will most likely be required to take to prove their writing skills for college admission. It has also helped reaffirm that the methods I use in my classroom are working.

I am the only English teacher at Carter County High School; therefore, I have no peers to judge my students' performance against within the district. I have been teaching for eleven years, but still sometimes I question whether I am preparing my students adequately for the challenges that await them at college and beyond. The Montana Writing Assessment has put me in direct contact with peers from all over the state who deal with the same questions I do. It has given me an additional measure of my students' proficiency. It has also given me the opportunity to score writing samples of students statewide. This has been invaluable to me as a way to see how my students stack up against the rest of the state.

In addition to participating in the spring testing, I also serve as a webscorer, scoring practice writing assignments for students from other schools throughout the school year. This is an excellent tool for schools because it gives feedback from a scorer outside the school district. I know all of my students' backgrounds and abilities so well that sometimes I wonder if I assess them equally or based more on their individual abilities. Having their writing assessed occasionally by someone totally objective helps me stay centered as well. I can look at the scores they receive and see where they need to improve, individually as well as at the group level. It helps me take a step back and take a look at the big picture.

When ACT and SAT began stepping up to the challenge of providing writing assessments, I thought that would probably be the end of the Montana Writing Assessment. But there are several things that concern me with letting the assessment of Montana students pass to these companies. First of all, some of the prompts don't have any correlation to life in Montana. How can a Montana student adequately write an essay taking sides on expanding the subway system in their city when many have never even experienced a city big enough to require such a system? The Montana prompts have been carefully selected to ensure that any Montana student should have ample background to write an informed opinion on the topic.

Another concern I have is the time limit both ACT and SAT are proposing. Thirty minutes is not adequate time to formulate a complete essay, in my opinion. The assessments from last spring prove

12/29/2003

this. Scores on tests of students who were allowed only thirty minutes to write were markedly lower than those allowed 40 minutes. That extra ten minutes can make a big difference.

Last year I chose the 30 minute time limit, mostly out of curiosity and because I knew that was the time ACT and SAT were using. I felt the students I was testing were stronger writers than the students I had tested the previous year. However, my students' scores were lower this year. The most interesting thing I discovered was that it was my top students whose scores suffered the most. Most students finished in the allowed time, but my strongest students were writing right up until the time expired and often did not get to finish with a strong conclusion. Had they been given an additional 10 minutes, I feel confident their scores would have been higher.

I am sure that you are looking at the financial aspect of this decision. If testing is already available elsewhere, why should Montana fund additional testing? But I truly feel that keeping the testing local will continue to strengthen the writing skills of Montana students. When the teachers are involved, we feel we have more at stake. I have learned so much from my participation as a scorer. I have then returned to the classroom with this knowledge and have been able to more efficiently help my students. I feel I have validation for my teaching practices. I can say to my students and their parents that I have the backing of the Montana Writing Assessment behind what I am doing.

Please take this information into consideration and continue supporting the Montana Writing Assessment.

Sincerely yours,

Cathy J. Frye
English instructor
Carter County High School
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Ekalaka, MT 59324
406-775-8767
bcfrye@yahoo.com