

Items in Action: Implementing Items in the Classroom - One State's Perspective

NCSC Writing AA-AAS¹

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I. Introduction

Assessing writing for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities (SWSCD) is new in some states. In other states the current alternate assessments may assess aspects of writing, but have not typically focused on the development of a student's final written product or response to a specific writing prompt. The National Center and State Collaborative Alternate Assessment Consortia (NCSC) aligned the writing section of the English Language Arts Alternate Assessment with academic standards which include organization, idea development, and conventions, thus necessitating that states provide professional development to the educators of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. NCSC has defined the writing assessment to be "Generating a permanent product to represent and/or organize ideas or thoughts so messages can be interpreted by someone else when the writer is not present. Symbols (e.g. picture symbols, objects) that represent and assistive technology that produce text may be used."

In many states, a paradigm shift regarding writing instruction is beginning to occur. Arizona's Alternate Assessment Unit builds all of their professional development based on the following premise: "Meet teachers where they are (in terms of writing instruction), then take what they are doing and make it better." In Arizona, this shift began with conveying the idea that writing is more than copying, tracing, or using a writing utensil. It is important that the focus of the lesson is moving students beyond copying and tracing.

Some of the ways Arizona's Alternate Assessment staff are facilitating this paradigm shift include: presenting information about the writing process in all alternate assessment in-person trainings and/or webinars, including discussion of writing instruction in a Community of Practice monthly webinar call, recruiting teachers from the state to participate in NCSC's student interaction writing studies, and inviting the participation of AZ teachers in NCSC Pilot 1 and 2. These opportunities provide Arizona educators first-hand information on the changing shape of writing instruction as we move forward.

Arizona is an operational state that participated in the NCSC reviews for the refinement of the assessment items, directions for test administrators, and the creation and refinement of the writing rubrics. The Arizona Alternate Assessment team believes that this involvement will help them truly understand the NCSC writing assessment, enabling them to better support educators in trainings and when out in the field.

The next segment highlights the implementation of our state's collaboration with a district, providing professional development to educators of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who will be administering the NCSC Alternate Assessment in spring 2015.

II. Pilot School

To prepare for the rollout of our new alternate assessment in writing, Arizona's Alternate Assessment staff felt it was necessary to work closely and directly with a small group of educators to understand how they were currently providing writing instruction.

In 2012, the Alternate Assessment Unit began a pilot project with a mid-sized elementary school district in Phoenix. The educators represented grades Pre-K through 8th grade who taught students with the most significant cognitive disabilities and two special education coaches. This pilot district's coaches and Arizona's Alternate Assessment Staff met monthly with the district's Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Professional development was focused on NCSC's instructional supports and resources. During the 2015 school year, the focus was writing instruction including implementation of the district's newly adopted writing curriculum. The district coaches and ADE staff met prior to the PLC meetings to plan and align the professional development to the professional development that was occurring for the district's general education teachers. Although the PLC teachers attended the writing curriculum professional development for all teachers, they did not believe the district's training addressed the true needs of their students. It was mutually decided that the next PLC meeting for these educators would provide training on the new writing curriculum, but with additional supports for these educators and their students that included writing strategies, brainstorming activities, quick writes, sentence starters, as well as using pictures and pairing the writing activities with adapted text.

III. Profession Learning Community (PLC)

PLC Meeting 1

The writing PLCs began with brainstorming- What is "writing"? The NCSC definition of writing was shared with the educators and initially many voiced concerns about their students being able to "write." This activity provided the coaching staff with an opportunity to begin insightful conversations with their educators including an opportunity to dispel myths such as a student must be able to talk or hold a pencil in order to produce a product. Teachers were shown how writing can be scaffolded or supported. Conversations by early grade level teachers centered on their students' reading or non-reading abilities, and that they did not think many of their students were ready to write. They could only copy or trace. Another conversation centered on copying and tracing. At the end of meeting, the recommendation was that the teachers try a brainstorming activity with their students in all grades on any topic of their choosing.

PLC Meeting 2

The next PLC meeting focused on training these educators on the districts newly adopted writing curriculum using a modified Writing Assignment Guide (WAG). The district coaches used materials to support activities that were used in the general education training. The educators received instruction on this new document, and were provided time to create a writing lesson that was aligned to our state's Alternate Academic Science Content Standards. NCSC instructional supports and resources were also provided for these educators along with access to the NCSC Wiki (https://wiki.ncscpartners.org/index.php/Main_Page) and adapted science books (commercially developed) that aligned to the Alternate Academic Science content standards. In the previous school year, this district participated in training centered on implementation of the NCSC Instructional Supports and Resources including the Graduated Understandings,

Instructional Families, and Element Cards. The Graduated Understandings document provides educators with the Core Content Connectors which are the standards broken down into a smaller tasks which allow more access to the standards. The purpose of the Instructional Families is to group the Core Content Connectors in families that are meaningful to instruction or how a teacher might teach all skills or concepts related to measurement or sorting versus just a check-off list. The purpose of the element cards is to provide ideas for educators related to the skills or content being taught. The element cards include the state standard, the core content connector, and essential understandings including concrete understandings and representation. This by far has been this group's most well-liked and well-received resource. The most significant change in these educators is that now they accept that their students can "write". One kindergarten teacher expressed that she did not realize her students could complete a sentence with the supports of sentence starters; in fact, they even completed a thematic unit with writing activities.

IV. Conclusion

These activities and actions will catapult writing instruction in our state. Arizona is now building on this partnership with the pilot district to share the steps of implementation and the lessons learned by the district support staff, and students. We are beginning to shift the paradigm and facilitate the necessary changes in teacher attitudes and supports. Teachers of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities are beginning to see the relevance of writing instruction, and their shifting beliefs can be utilized to support the wider scope of professional development of our educators. Goal one ACCOMPLISHED!

The Arizona Department of Education Alternate Assessment unit has now expanded their work to other districts and is planning to provide state-wide professional development on writing instruction for educators that teach students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.