

NECAP 2006 Writing Assessment
Interpretation Notes

The NECAP Writing Assessment is designed to measure students' ability to produce extended writing samples in multiple genres each year. One genre of writing is selected for extensive development and three others require shorter responses. This design accomplishes several goals. Primarily, it maintains our commitment to measuring actual writing rather than merely indicators of writing ability gathered by answering multiple-choice questions. Secondly, the design provides a look at performance on several genres of writing rather than focusing on just one form of writing each year. The test also includes some multiple-choice items to gather information about students' command of grammar and conventions in isolation as well as in their writing samples.

So how can we interpret and use the results? The first step is to look at the distribution of scores in your schools or district and use the "NECAP Interpretation Guide" in order to determine whether the changes are significant at each achievement level. Also, think about your writing program across the curriculum. Keep in mind that this year's extended writing prompt asked students to write in **Response to Literary Text** at both grades 5 and 8. Last year's extended writing prompt was **Report Writing** at grade 5 and writing in **Response to Informational Text** at the eighth grade. Next, be sure to examine the released writing test at each grade along with the rubrics and sample student work. Most importantly, use the results cautiously at the individual student level. Many factors can influence a change in scores that go beyond students' writing becoming stronger or weaker. The very nature of the writing prompts can impact the overall results. The most important indicator of student progress in writing is classroom-based work reviewed in the context of defined and calibrated teacher judgments.

The design of the NECAP Writing Assessment poses some technical challenges that also need to be considered when interpreting results. By designing a test that asks fewer, but more involved questions that require more time to answer, the NECAP writing test yields fewer total points than a test that could be given in the same amount of time with all multiple-choice items. We believe that this is appropriate in order to obtain results of students' actual writing. At grades 5 and 8, the writing test has 37 total points. In comparison, the reading test has 52 total points, and the mathematics test has 66 total points. The smaller number of possible points on the writing tests does complicate the ability of the test to produce stable achievement level results from year to year, however.

Although it is most intuitive to think about criterion-referenced test results in terms of the percent of students achieving proficiency, this approach may not be the most productive when looking at changes from year to year on the writing test. For example, 51% of RI's fifth-graders are proficient on the writing test this

year and 55% were proficient last year. But, the average scale score increased from 539 to 540. This means that, on average, when the scores were translated into a scale that runs from 500 to 580, the average score went up by one point. How can proficient performance improve slightly and yet the percentage of students Proficient or above decline? This results because of two factors.

The first factor is the small number of total points on the writing test. This impacts results in two ways:

- a) there are large numbers of students at each score point – particularly in the middle of the score range; and
- b) there are relatively large gaps of 2-3 scaled score points between each raw score.

The second factor is that statewide average performance is very close to the Proficient cut scores of 540 at grade 5 and 840 at grade 8. The impact of the combination of these two factors is that small shifts in the distribution of student scale scores can result in seemingly large shifts in the percentage of students performing at the Proficient level.