Write to the Point: The Case of the Floor Dropping Out in 2017

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So, the mystery begins. Writing scores dropped in fourth grade—a lot. Many of us have been scratching our heads wondering what was up, what happened, what do we do, why me, what next? Clues are everywhere, and yet few seem to fully answer our questions. Let’s examine what we know and what we can do.

Changes in the Assessment: Test Length and Scoring
The writing test has changed three times in the last three years but good writing hasn’t. However, the changes in the assessment give us a clue into why we may have seen a drop in the percentage of kids passing the test. Take a look at the changes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Composition</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personal narrative expository</td>
<td>expository</td>
<td>expository</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>16 pts (8 points each)</td>
<td>8 pts</td>
<td>8 pts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36% of score</td>
<td>30% of score</td>
<td>25% of score</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Revision and Editing</td>
<td>28 questions/points</td>
<td>18 questions/points</td>
<td>24 questions/points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64% of score</td>
<td>70% of score</td>
<td>75% of score</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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In 2016, TEA, responding to HB 743, shortened the writing test from a two-day assessment to a one-day assessment, reducing the number of compositions and the number of multiple choice items for revision and editing. In 2017, six items were added to the revision and editing section to increase the validity and reliability of the assessment. As a result, it is complex to compare pass rates between years because the weighting of the scores is different each year. The most obvious difference is that the revision and editing section carries more weight in 2017 than it did in 2016. This is not a call for more revision and editing materials. Rather, it is a call to make sure students have increased authentic and varied experiences in revision and editing with their own writing and with others’ writing.

Dive into the Data
What data are meaningful to help you understand how to address the instructional issues on your campus? It is important to think of the writing data in parts: score distribution for composition and percentage of items correct for revision and for editing. Here are some data points to look for:

- The percentage of kids getting a 5 or higher on the composition (adjacent scoring). The composition score represents not only the student expectations for composition but also those for revision and editing. The higher the composition score is, the more likely you are to impact performance on the revision and editing items.
- Variation between years.
- Aggregated data (multiple years) for revision and editing.

Learn from the Writing Samples
There is nothing better than using students’ writing samples to help make meaning of all of this. I know, you will want to dig into the item analysis for the multiple-choice section—restrain yourself (we will get there). As a PLC (be sure to include grade 3 in this discussion), consider the following steps.

- Sort your samples by score.
- Notice the impact of revision on the overall score. Here are some themes to look for:
  - Students establish a strong controlling idea.
  - Writing is precise and concise.
  - Sentence to sentence connections support coherence.
  - Strong structures that avoid formulaic approaches are present.
  - Natural student voice is evident.
- Discuss the relationship between students’ composition score to their performance on the revision items.
Starting Points

As instructional leaders, where do we start? Start with the PLC and examine the following:

1. **Habits**: Ensure students are engaged in the writing process every day and remember that writing is about collaboration and feedback—idea generation, sharing and refining early drafts, working with others to revise and edit their work, and taking stronger drafts to publication.

2. **Thinking**: Writing is thinking. Make connections between author’s craft in reading and writing and create planning time in PLCs for teachers to select or design engaging experiences that help kids develop the metacognitive strategies around each part of the writing process (e.g., ways to generate a topic or controlling idea?).

3. **Choice**: Plan to vary the stimulus for writing. Kids need lots of opportunity for choice in their writing as well as prompts, on demand, anchor text, or mentor text experiences.

4. **Revisiting the writing**: Revision and editing skills are built through collaboration and feedback. Review the standards for revision and editing; as students learn to manage one, add another. Use student mentor texts to teach the concepts. Minimize isolated practice for revision and editing.

The mystery of the drop in scores may be solved—the change in weighting; however the case isn’t closed. Now we are challenged to get kids to write with greater coherence, with more authenticity and voice, and with the strategies (and courage) to revise their work. As we continue to unpack the data from 2017, teachers (and leaders) who write with kids, who write for kids and who celebrate writing with kids will see the greatest results. Write on.