HEMLOCK'S STAND:

One Urban Elementary School's Efforts To Raise Test Scores

Reforming Teaching/Learning in a High Stakes Testing Environment

Capital Region Science Education Partnership
University at Albany, SUNY

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The Battleground

Twelve fourth-graders sit at their desks facing the teacher. There is an empty desk between them. The classroom door is shut, the hallway completely silent. A sign hangs ominously on the outside of the doorway. 'Stop!' It warns, 'ELA Testing.' A window lets a cold January breeze in. "*To wake you up*," the teacher informs. Outside the streets lie still as if they too know the importance of this event. Inside the students lean into their test booklets, reading earnestly and seriously. Occasionally the grind of a tennis ball-covered desk leg fills the empty air as it pushes across the warped oak floor. The muffled sounds of basketballs in the gym down the hallway can also be felt through the floor. A pencil drops, a child stretches, another coughs, but for an hour each day, like soldiers who run out onto the battle field when the trumpet sounds, there are no cries of complaint, no cowardliness, no desertions. Will they return as conquerors, or retreat in shame, carrying too many dead, too many wounded? What are they fighting for and for whom?

Only three years old, the English Language Arts' exam or ELA has become the benchmark of success, the test for determining the plight of schools, the future of teachers and the learning of students. But for 400 students and 30 teachers, what 65 4th graders accomplish in these three hours carries an enormous weight, can make or break the future of this city school. Although Hemlock has never been designated a School Under Registration Review by the state, the staff at Hemlock believe that the district has an interest in assessing how well they carry out district and state curricular requirements. "*We're being watched, that's for sure*," comments one teacher. "*It doesn't matter that our scores went up last year, we seem to have lost already.*" This is the story of one school's response to the New York State's new standards and testing requirements. More specifically, the story weaves together three distinct but integrated storylines: the central importance of the ELA in the lives of these teachers and students, the strengths and weaknesses of a district-wide response to state mandates, and perceptions and pressures around testing in general. It is also a story of control, dignity, and compliance as a small

• Note: To protect the identity of the participants in this case study all teachers are identified using the gender 'she.' Hemlock is a pseudonym for the school.

group of teachers attempt to integrate new state and district requirements amidst the reality of teaching and learning in a multi-cultural urban setting.

These twelve students are your average students. They are among the ones without IEPs (Individualized Education Program) or testing accommodations, without serious emotional or behavioral needs, the ones the school is counting on to raise the school's ELA scores. These are your average students in a school that is about 50% African American and Hispanic and has a free and reduced lunch rate of over 95%. In this group alone, there are five African American girls, three white boys, 1 white girl and three Hispanic boys. There is the boy who comes in with 24 brand new number two pencils that the teacher can't let him use because she has to provide her own. There is the grumpy girl and the overweight girl. There is the girl sore from sledding the evening before. There is the skinny girl with the K-mart clothes. There is the boy recovering from a Grand Mal seizure that had him hospitalized the weekend before. There is the boy with a tooth hanging only by a nerve but who can't get it pulled till after the test is over. There is the girl who couldn't read just a few months ago but who holds steady for the two first days only to cry out in frustration "*they don't say it anywhere those stupid folks*," shutting down angrily on the third. There is the girl just recently transferred from another school who asks desperately, "*what can you help me with? I don't know what they are asking*?" when all the teacher can do is tell her she can't help, it's a test. At Hemlock, these are your average students.

The ELA is not the only test given to students at Hemlock. Second, third, and fifth graders take the Terra Nova, which involve performance-based assessments in math and reading. The fifth graders also have a new state-mandated social studies exam and the fourth graders still have a state-mandated math and science exam to complete. Additionally, teachers keep portfolios on all students, K – 5, using benchmark tests in the math and reading series and student analysis profile reports. The ELA, however, is the battleground within which the teachers feel they are both fighting for recognition while feeling as if they have already lost. "*We are being judged on something that is largely out of our control,*" the teachers explain as they relate stories of student absenteeism, mobility, and academic need. "*And what does it do to the individual kid? If we have a child who's a slow learner? And that is a huge concern that is being left out of this whole test thing by the media and the politicians and the regents. They don't want to know that there is such a thing as a slow learner. These are not children that don't learn. These are children that do learn – slowly. And to tell a child, who gets to a higher level in a school year that they are a failure because they didn't reach this goal, is horribly wrong, horribly wrong for that child*."

Trying to reach that goal, however, is what the teachers do. At least 4 hours each week from September to January, the teachers prepare the students for those three days, for that moment in time when achievement stops, when Hemlock stands, quietly waiting. But this story cannot be told without back-tracking a few years, because ELA scores do not stand alone, especially for schools performing under state levels; this year's scores need to show improvement over last year's. Still performing under the state standards, the students at Hemlock need to show Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Hemlock has

consistently succeeded not only in meeting their AYP target goals, but in exceeding them. But with a higher state standard cut-off point in the ELA and math tests, new district curricula and mandates, as well as having to prepare students for 4 state exams and improve on last year's test results, the pressure is high. Hemlock's performance will not go unnoticed. And the teachers know it:

"Last year we were getting visitors, state visitors. Luckily we have improved our scores over the past several years and it's a big thing so the visitors have sort of trickled down. We have staff meetings specifically to discuss state interventions and the possibility of being the school that's going to have to implement becoming a SURR school."

"Last year we did have curriculum coordinators in the building quite frequently when there was some question as to whether we were following the district's plan for achieving optimal ELA scores, which we weren't doing."

"No, we were achieving the optimal scores, we just weren't doing it the right way [as mandated by the district's basal series]."

In 1999, only 16% of 4th graders passed the ELA; ten students out of 66 scored a three. In 2000, 40% of 4th graders scored a 3 or more. And in 2001 50% of the students scored a 3 or more placing the school just shy of that year's state standard of 140 (see Table 1 for more detail). The 4th grade teachers at Hemlock attribute this rate of success directly to a comprehensive program developed several years ago by the School Wide Project Team previous to the first implementation of the ELA. This year, however, they aren't able to follow their program, at least not in the way they would have liked. One teacher explains:

"*I've heard a lot of people mention how regimented our [district] curriculum has become. However, when our plan was first put into place we basically had no curriculum. Every teacher made up his or her own curriculum. One of the first things that the fourth grade teachers and the remedial teachers did when we heard about the ELA coming down was to get ourselves educated and find the materials. There was nothing in the district. We pioneered and invented some top-notch curriculum which we then used, refined, added to, and then shared starting with fourth grade and then down to third and second grade. The School-Wide Project (SWP) team was very heavily involved in getting a cohesive curriculum in our school so that the scores would improve. We designed our curriculum with our kids in mind. We organized our resources with our kids' needs in mind. We all worked as a team toward those goals. And the district in the meantime was about three years behind us in their efforts in coming up with a curriculum. We have had in place curriculum that we invented in this school and that's why our scores have risen, not because of these mandated curriculums that have all of a sudden been thrown on us. This regimented curriculum that people are talking about was only thrown at us last year. We have yet to see the result of this mandated curriculum. I am not convinced that it is as good as what we had*."

Table 1: Hemlock scores on New York State 4th grade Tests

ELA (all students)	Level 1 (not passing)	Level 2 (not passing)	Level 3 (passing)	Level 4 (passing)
1998 - 1999	25%	59%	16%	0%
1999 - 2000	30%	30%	33%	7%
2000 - 2001	16%	34%	44%	6%
Math (all students)				
1998 - 1999	24%	29%	37%	11%
1999 - 2000	16%	31%	35%	18%
2000 - 2001	7%	30%	52%	11%
Science (all students)	below State Designated Level		above State Designated Level	
1999 – 2000	38%		62%	
2000 - 2001	37%		63%	

The School

Hemlock stands solid. A brick fortress, it is the only institutional structure among a working-class neighborhood of one-way streets and rows of one and two family particle homes. Like a fortress, it stands a perfect square, protecting a central courtyard or in this case playground currently under renovation. And like a fortress, there is little traffic in and out of the school. What traffic there is is diverted through the front doors. Welcoming parents is a huge yellow sign that reads:

> Parents and visitors please note:
>
> **Unacceptable Behavior Will Not Be Tolerated in This Building.**
> This includes yelling, screaming, cursing and threatening staff, students or any other person on this property. This behavior will cause immediate intervention and referral to appropriate legal and police departments.

Next to this sign are other, more positive signs as well as a variety of parent education flyers handed out by the Hemlock Family Room. I have reproduced this one here because it points to the reality of working within a low-income, highly mobile, urban neighborhood. While most families whose children attend Hemlock act and communicate appropriately with school personnel, some do not. The staff and teachers at Hemlock are continuously working to balance safety and security with openness and family involvement and disagree vehemently about the presence and use of such a sign. Many teachers find it offensive and would like it removed, especially since it is directed at only a small percentage of parents. Others who have been physically or verbally assaulted, or have been threatened or intimidated feel strongly that such a message should be stated clearly and have succeeded in advocating for its presence.

Hemlock is one of 11 elementary schools in the district. There are also 3 middle schools, one high school and one alternative education site. There are about 8,800 students in the district as a whole: 56.5% are white, 30.1% Black, 9.3% Hispanic, and 4.1% Asian. The center poverty index is 21% with a free and reduced lunch rate of 69% and a dropout rate of 7%. Hemlock has a student enrollment of about 410 in its PreK-5 programs. Its population is 52% White, 35% Black, 12% Hispanic and 1% other. It has a free and reduced lunch rate of over 95% and a student stability rate of 65%. It is considered one of the neediest schools in the district.

Hemlock is an old school, with wide hallways and solid wood floors. The walls are thick strengthening the quiet and disciplined atmosphere. There are few people walking through the hallways throughout the day, and students always walk in rows accompanied by an adult. Occasionally pairs of students walk to and from the resource room, bathroom, or water fountain chatting cheerfully, saying hi to anyone they see. There is nothing much to divert them from their destination, as the hallways are for the most part clear of furniture and debris. A quick stop at the water fountain and back to work they go. Structure, discipline, consistency, routines, and safety are considered by the teachers and staff at Hemlock to be an essential and important component in meeting the academic needs of their students. The former principal explains how this came about: *"What we did was take the [district's discipline] code and really set up guidelines for, what you would think were silly things like: How are we going to get the kids into the building in the morning in a safe, orderly manner? How are we going to exit kids in a safe, orderly manner? Walking through the halls, getting them down to the lunchroom, setting up a separate time-out area, making sure that there are interventions in the time-out area, so it encompassed everything, you know, even getting down to marking windows and doors to make sure you report to the main office. So it was a really comprehensive look at order and discipline in the school and how it fits into the district's discipline code. I think that was a real home run and a measure for success."*

The teachers and staff at Hemlock have been characterized as being student-centered and dedicated to the particular and often multiple needs of the students who attend Hemlock. Besides holding parent-teacher conferences and being available to parents before and after school, the teachers send parent letters home every week describing classroom practices and upcoming events as well as make numerous phone calls to parents to share individual student's struggles and achievements throughout the year. Many of the teachers also take the time over the summer to meet with each family before the school year begins. Another way this dedication is apparent is in the amount of student work displayed throughout the hallways, openly showing pride in the students' work and cultural heritage. Picasso-style faces, silhouettes of cities and mountains, totem poles and African masks adorn the walls near the art room. Examples of math problems, essays, and charts providing evidence of learning and literacy hang outside the classrooms. Students' individualities are expressed through stories about themselves, graphs about their heights, or personal statements about dreams and resolutions. Posters of prominent African American leaders, poets, scientists, and athletes hang among the student work as if they too were cheering the students on. An array of photos taken at field trips or summer school and plaques of recognition celebrate the school as a whole.

Near the main office, a huge American flag has been created from traced and cut-out red, white and blue paper hands. Under a window is a huge tank awaiting pennies for the victims of September 11th, half filled with coins and dollars of all denominations.

The classrooms show their age better. The wood floors are worn and warped and the desk legs have been covered with tennis balls to minimize scratching or noise when they are moved. While the student desks and chairs are standardized and adjustable and each classroom is equipped with three or four new computers with earphones for each child, the rest of the classrooms are an interesting assortment of old and used book cases, cubbies, cartons, filing cabinets, bins and tables filled and overflowing with books and piles and piles of paper packets. On the wall of each classroom are guides or a reminder of the scoring criteria, such as for example:

What does my grade mean?

4 Excellent (passing) –
Followed all directions.
Answered all questions well.
Cooperated and turned work in on time.
Maybe even did some extra.

3 Competent (passing) –
Followed all directions.
Answered most questions correctly.
Cooperated and turned work in on time.

2 Developing (could pass) –
Follows directions but needs to be reminded.
Answers some questions correctly.
Is trying hard – doing some 4th grade work

1 Below (not passing) –
Doesn't follow directions.
Doesn't know answers.
Doesn't try very often.
Not doing 4th grade work.

Otherwise, teachers personalize their classrooms with plants, artwork, posters, planets or other paper items hanging from the ceilings, math or writing guidelines, maps and other items.

A School-Wide Initiative Gone Unrecognized

As the ELA approaches, the 4th grade teachers and the reading teachers look more and more drained and discouraged. The pressure mounts and the program is difficult to administer. Carrying piles of magazines and handouts around and feeling as if they've only reached a few students has taken its toll on these teachers. As they put the students through yet another practice test, they prepare themselves for the worst. As one teacher explains: *"When I walked into the ELA last year I was very confident of walking out of*

there with good scores and this year I am not. What frustrated me the most this year is we had built a good structure. The kids were used to it. The kids functioned well. They knew what to expect, and all of a sudden we had to completely shift gears and it was not as effective this year. Last year I took a kid who would have been a level 1 and she pulled a level 3, and I just could not pull off the same thing with the new program. I could not run it in the same way. I just could not get the consistency that we had the year before."

This is the story that is told at Hemlock:

Hemlock has always had a reputation as one of the least successful schools in the district, at least according to the usual standards of measurement. As one teacher put it: *"Hemlock has low self-esteem when it comes to test scores."* Although, another one adds: *"Teachers will argue that student achievement measured against each student's starting point is one of the tops in the State, and they don't believe the school has gotten recognition in the past for this."* But the teachers knew, even before the administration of the first ELA that without considerable intervention on their part their students would not do well on the ELA. One teacher relates how they formed a team and with Title I money took action: *"The name of the team was called School Wide Project Team, SWP for short, and evolved from Title I money when the theory was to put the decision-making for Title I funds at the school level and let them make decisions that would best serve their population. That started before the ELA. So we began working as a SWP team and it didn't just include improving scores on language arts, it included things like discipline and parent involvement, attendance, you know, a whole school improvement effort. Once the ELA came in that became the focus of many of us on that committee. The reading teachers were on that committee, the math teacher, and you know the math test came in then too, a fourth grade teacher was on that committee and we started moving resources around and organizing the program so that we could better teach for the scores to go up on the test. We spent a lot of time analyzing tests, and every summer we would analyze what happened and adjust the curriculum. At the same time we were making a huge effort to integrate. We were choosing materials and making a huge effort to have the selections do double duty with science or social studies, working around the themes that we did, so that it was a whole integrated package. We realized two years into the program, well actually we didn't realize, thank goodness our first grade teachers spoke loudly enough so that we heard them say that we were neglecting early literacy. So we bought into a district initiated Reading Recovery program and we hired another reading recovery teacher and that person started training the first grade teachers and the kindergarten teachers. And we were feeling really, really good about what we were doing in this school and then the blast hit us. Every year our scores improved and then the blast."*

In order to understand the context of this year's ELA program and the teacher's reference to 'the blast' quoted above, I need to describe how the district's adoption of a reading series thwarted Hemlock's ELA plan. Prior to the ELA it was the reading teacher's responsibility to teach only remedial reading but the SWP reform effort reorganized the remedial staff and resources to more directly and systematically focus on the ELA. They hired an extra person to assist in reducing class sizes, systematically analyzed the test format and goals and then developed a comprehensive program that had

as its sole purpose to prepare the 3rd and 4th graders for the ELA. Using Ladybug magazine in 3rd grade and Spider in 4th (commercial children's literary magazines), the reading teachers created multiple choice and short answer packets based on magazine stories. One of the reading teachers who developed the material explains: "*What I found looking at the test was that the level of reading required for the test was much more sophisticated, higher thinking skills, higher vocabulary, longer sentences. The old basal didn't work for that so with the principal's consent and some financial support we purchased a series of children's magazines and built the ELA curriculum around the stories in them.*"

The ELA curriculum included blocking off specific times each week in 3rd and 4th grade for ELA training, breaking up students into four homogeneous groups, and having four teachers each developing lessons and teaching to different groups in different locations. The groups were based on the students' reading levels and Terra Nova scores, and on their potential or expected performance on the ELA, as solid 3s, 3s but potential 4s, 2s but potential 3s, and 1s and 2s. The teachers felt that such small homogeneous grouping provided their students with a close personal relationship with a teacher and strengthened each teacher's ability to gear his or her instruction to best meet the students' individual needs and strengths. One of the reading teachers explains that the teachers *"who had the higher groups could do a lot more of the advanced higher order thinking skills whereas my kids would be doing a lot more of the decoding, word recognition and basic lower level comprehension skills."*

As it turns out, however, the first year of the full program, 1999 – 2000, was also the only year these teachers were able to conduct it as planned in both the third and fourth grade classrooms. In the Fall of 2000, the district's curriculum committee introduced a new reading basal for grades 1 through 3 that included as part of its instructional guide a mandate not to pull-out students anymore for reading or for ELA. As one teacher states: *"Our district specifically decreed that we do not do any kind of pulling out or homogenous grouping across classes or grade levels."* The teachers admit that they knew not to pull out last year even in fourth grade because the district had moved towards inclusion. However, since their old series was inadequate as preparation for the ELA and they had not been provided with the new basal yet in 4th grade or any other material from the district to support or enable a switch in instructional methods, the teachers again pulled out and based last year's fourth grade program on the magazines and teacher-made materials. The teachers explain that last year's 4th graders were the only students who had two full years of their ELA program. And while also noting that they were a stronger group academically than this year's fourth graders, can't help feeling extremely proud of how well they did last year on the ELA.

The response from the district was unexpected. Even though last year the ELA scores rose another 28%, the teachers feel they were essentially slapped in the face. As one teacher who was not directly involved explains: *"We were told to teach the reading program in a certain way and many of us tried. But some people did start doing pull out, and a good teacher is going to enhance a program with what he or she feels the children need. But we weren't supposed to be doing that. And our scores went up and then our*

principal at the time spoke with the superintendent and told him what we were doing and the superintendent flipped out, was yelling at him because we did not follow protocol. We didn't though, in all honesty we were told to do something, we tried and it wasn't working. And we wrote the superintendent a letter. We had people from the district office come and meet with us. We told the superintendent our frustrations. We told him what was not working. You know we weren't secretive about it like they told us we were. We tried to discuss it with him but nobody wanted to hear it. We weren't given much reasoning except that research shows that pulling students out does not work. But as we all know you can skew research to show anything if that's what you want to show. Why you can pull out for math and not reading we have no idea, it makes no sense to us. Part of the huge frustration thrust upon people last year was that we had this program, our scores were improving, our children were learning, it was working, and then it was pulled out from underneath us. We were being successful at something and it's not like anyone was trying to make their job easier, our children were learning. It was working. And although our scores made a higher jump that year than any other building in the district, we were never acknowledged. Letters of acknowledgment went to other schools on email and in hard copy to the office and we never got any. Nobody ever acknowledged what we had done because it wasn't done in the way they wanted it done. So people were just crushed by that, the people who did all the work and put in the time and effort."

Expecting recognition, the blow was huge. As one teacher explains: "*Now I wouldn't dare pull a student out to help a student improve. We were told in no uncertain terms that we had to follow policy. The removal of the principal was a message to staff. First, we got the news of how well we had done. We were shocked and ecstatic, and then totally demoralized. We were stunned. Our superintendent has never congratulated us.*" The disarmament was complete. The teachers were left shaken and unsure.

This year the 3rd and 4th grade teachers cover the reading basal on their own and the reading teachers go from classroom to classroom doing some form of ELA preparation: reading a story or poem, listening to a story, completing multiple choice questions, or writing essay questions. Armed with packets and magazines, they take charge of the entire classroom. They enter and for an hour direct sometimes up to 28 students and 3 other teachers in intensive, fast paced test preparation exercises. Then they exit, enter another classroom and do the same. This year has become aptly known as "the reading teachers in action."

On the other hand, math is structured around the concept of reduced class size and students are grouped by ability according to their Terra Nova scores. The fact that they can group by ability during math but not during reading or English language arts seems illogical to the teachers who are still trying to comprehend the superintendent's dissatisfaction and reaction. Their current struggle to keep their ELA scores up is for them one of honor. "*It's a higher stress level. We're more stressed. We're worried about it. It's a reflection of our teaching that comes forth on those scores and really it's not a reflection of the effort that's put in."* While the teachers admit to feeling they can't win regardless of how well they do, they also believe they are being judged on this and fear the worst. A teacher predicts: "*The scores will be lower. They are not as prepared and*

they are a less able group than last year. But we can't afford to have a drop in scores, not this school."

A District on the Offensive

> *"We're all using packaged programs. We're mandated to use them. We're reminded to use them from the administration and we are required to be at certain places at certain times and we're required to think about what standards they address, and the different materials we use. And I think generally everybody in our school thinks and talks about the test more than ever. And we are interested when it makes the newspaper and it's big news and we pin up the news clippings in the office. So I think yes, we're all focused more so than three or four years ago on the tests."*
>
> (Primary level teacher)

The story of Hemlock does not begin or end at the level of the school. At the same time that the teachers at Hemlock were putting their heads together to develop a plan that would boost the achievement of their students, the district was doing the same for the whole district. Much of the district's systemic and structural processes were already in place prior to the new state standards. The Curriculum Coordination Council which oversees curricular decisions and professional development in all curricular areas has retained its structure albeit with a more focused agenda around complying and meeting state standards in all areas. Similarly the district's Education Plan has always included yearly Building Level Improvement Plans so meeting New York State requirements for a Comprehensive District Educational Plan didn't require major systemic changes. What has changed, according to the superintendent, is that there are more external pressures than ever with a more intense focus on student performance and data of all kind. Districts in New York State therefore, have to both meet the state requirements while also providing ample support and guidance to their schools to achieve the state standards and performance levels in a healthy and feasible way.

Curricular alignment and standardization

Many districts have responded to the state requirements by adopting curricular programs that seem most aligned with the state standards and able to prepare the students for the state mandated tests. The Deputy Superintendent explains: *"I think the focus is certainly narrowed in on the assessments and what they measure and what that tells us about informing good practice and the skills embedded in the assessments. Curriculum decisions are measured in light of how they meet the state standards. It's a more focused approach of course because the standards provide the focus. So to that degree it's a more unified kind of focus."*

Series Adopted by District:

Scott Foresman Reading: Seeing is Believing. (2000). Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers.
(Introduced year 2000 – 2001 to first through third graders and in the year 2001 –2002 to fourth and fifth graders.)

Everyday Mathematics. The University of Chicago School Mathematic's Project. (2002). Everyday Learning Corporation. Chicago, IL.
(Introduced 1999 – 2000 to 1 – 5 graders although this year the manual has been updated so there are changes in the lessons.)

Explore New York. (1998). Houghton Mifflin Company. Boston, MA.
Maps-Globes-Graphs. (2000). Steck-Vaugh Altamont Company. Austin, TX.

For science there are 3 STC (Science and Technology for Children) kits per year in grades 1-5, developed with the support of the Smithsonian and the National Science Foundation.

Standardization puts all teachers on the same page, sometimes literally, in terms of what they are teaching and when. There are several reasons district administrators explain why this approach makes sense to a district like this one. First, since all students are now required to pass the regents' exams, it assures that all students are given the same curricular training in their effort to meet that requirement. Second, it provides the district and the schools with an informational base from which they are able to identify strengths and weaknesses in particular areas, such as schools, teachers, curricular units, or other program delivery areas. Third, it places the responsibility for assuring that the state standards are effectively covered across all the grade levels. And fourth, in a district plagued with low attendance, high drop-out rates and high mobility, it provides a consistency of approach that both takes into account this mobility, but is also used to assist the district in identifying the other, more hidden root causes of these problems.

Whether or not they approve of the state testing program, the teachers do recognize the need for the district to adopt curriculum programs that align with the standards and prepare students to do well on the state tests. The teachers feel generally that the state tests are behind the district-wide efforts to reform the curriculum. Several teachers share their impressions of the new reading and math series:

"The district is now focused on the testing so they did buy packages to replace outdated materials. When I first came here several years ago the primary grades were using outdated readers. So the district has made a huge financial investment in the Scott Foresman Reading Program that comes with the workbooks, and glossy picture books, and developmentally designed and geared to the standards, and also with the Chicago Math series. And we have been implementing these programs for the past several years. So everybody's using the same materials, and whether or not they are good or bad, or everybody has different feelings for them, at least the district is providing materials that I

don't think they were providing earlier in response to their concern about the test scores."

"We know what's on the [math] test. We've seen it enough times that we know what the kids are going to see there. We don't know the specific questions but we know what skills are there. There are a lot of word problems. With the new math standards they're doing more and more to make sure that the children really have number sense and that's where we really need to do a lot of work. And I think that's one of the reasons why this program [Everday Math] was so highly thought of."

"The materials we purchased district-wide, even at the primary level, are very ELA-geared. And in order to get through the material, you're doing many activities that are very ELA-esque, lots of writing, lots of reading, lots of phonics, lots of analysis of stories, things of that nature."

"I'm new to the grade level so I do appreciate in a way the materials and the structure. But I find that when I do get a great idea, in an effort not to fall behind, I can't do it, because we are somewhat under pressure to do all. Now that the district has made the investment in this program they want us all on the same page, they want us all to complete the materials, show evidence that we've completed the materials by putting benchmark things in their folders and not to deviate from it too much. Cause I guess the assumption is if we all expose them across the grade levels to all this stuff eventually it will pay off on the state tests."

"Almost by osmosis."

"Just through exposure to the same. They're taking these benchmark tests in 1st grade, 2nd grade, and 3rd grade and the benchmark tests look a lot like the ELA. By the time they get to the ELA, it shouldn't be as much of a shock or a surprise. I think that's the underlining idea behind the materials that we use."

The superintendent explains that whether teachers like it or not, accountability is the name of the game. And it would be irresponsible not to use whatever diagnostic tools were at hand for understanding not only what the state tests are measuring, but also how well the curriculum is preparing for those measurements. You can't have a system where people cover whatever they want, he says, because it is unfair to the students; it's the youngster in the end who is harmed if a subject or unit wasn't covered or taught well.

The superintendent is critical of how New York State goes about collecting and using data for accountability purposes though. He says that there are too many simplistic assumptions like the idea that low test scores mean a school or district is bad. He feels that too often, public education systems approach the use of data backwards. Instead of approaching an event or a problem with a question and then asking: 'What data do I need to answer the question?' What he tends to see are huge data collection efforts with no guiding questions, leading policy makers rubbing their heads and wondering: 'What does this mean? How can we make it mean something?'

He describes three data-oriented efforts currently under way in the district. First, the district is building upon the data collected through state and district tests results by also collecting building-level reading and math series benchmark tests results. Teachers and staff across the district are being informed on how to read and analyze these results to inform their instructional and curricular programs. Identifying gaps or areas of weaknesses means that the district can develop relevant and directed professional development programs.

The second data-oriented effort uses the same information but displays it for a different purpose. The superintendent feels that the notion that everyone will read and be at a certain level by 4th grade is unrealistic and provides little important information about student development and growth in core areas. The benchmark tests can be used to show growth not only for individual students, but for whole programs as well. He feels that being able to show that students have grown in certain areas validates and celebrates the work of teachers, especially those working in high needs' schools.

Finally, formalizing the district's Academic Intervention Services (AIS) in ways that can track students from grade level to grade level and from school to school is another important source of information. AIS is a state mandate that requires that districts put together an intervention plan for students who fall under state-specified scores on the state tests and may not be getting services through special education. The district's plan is in its second year of development and has involved hiring six AIS consultants and developing a comprehensive process for identifying students in need of AIS services, formulating a coverage of those services, and then determining exit criteria to get students off of AIS.

AIS consultants are former classroom teachers who have expertise in professional development because part of their job is not to work with identified AIS children but to work closely with teachers to assist classroom and remedial teachers in developing plans to best help the children thus classified. *"Basically AIS is anything that a student receives above and beyond the general curriculum in that grade level,"* Hemlock's AIS consultant explains. *"There are four ways that a student can get referred for AIS: One is through attendance, if the attendance issue is affecting the student's academic success. You can also have a child referred on classroom performance issues. For example, lack of participation, missing homework, poor test results, teacher recommendation, or all. The other is for language issues, with the LETs, ELL, and ESL, so the language battery is what we would use to find out if the student was qualified for that. And finally, for discipline, an excess of ten referrals a month is considered discipline."*

As with other instructional programs, the teachers at Hemlock are expected to integrate AIS services throughout their daily programs. So for example, during a reading or math class, you might see two or three students working independently on computers using the Computer Curriculum Corporation (CCC) which provides math and reading skills through computer based programming. Similarly, the leveled readers provided by the reading series are also used to modify individual instructional programs for students. *"It's making people more aware that you can teach to the whole class, but you also have*

to individualize at the same time," the AIS consultant explains. She continues: *"In addition to your regular day there's also after school programs and before school programs that qualify for AIS. At this school we have, through the 21st Century grant, an after school program that specifically has certified teachers involved in the after school or before school programming to deal with homework."*

The notion of having an AIS consultant to assist teachers in developing individualized plans for students is appealing. In practice, however, this has not worked out as successfully as teachers would have liked. Along with other school-based services like remedial help, counseling, and special education, AIS has not been adequately supportive of what teachers are required to do especially in regards to state standards and tests. No one faults the AIS consultant's willingness or her ability to help. Rather the reality of work in schools paints a different picture. One in which teachers and the AIS consultant get pulled in too many directions to make collaboration around individual students' needs possible.

Curricular woes and a clash in philosophies

> *"You need to know how to juggle. You need to know how to do the individualized instruction here but still have the fun stuff going on over here, and it's like a big juggle. Being a teacher is like being a magician."* (Primary grade teacher)

The teachers understand that the district is trying to address some of the issues they all face in a district with high needs and they generally agree that being on the same page with their colleagues is a good thing both for their instructional practice and for their students. In theory the search for consistency across grade levels and schools makes a lot of sense. The principal explains: *"I think probably the outside world is so difficult and the students are so difficult that consistency provides security. And I think the teachers really care about their kids and they know their kids are going to move; our kids move all the time from building to building and out of district. And teachers realize that it's important when they get a student coming in from (other school in district), in fourth grade in the third month, it's going to be very helpful to them to know he's going to be at the same place in math, science, English, and social studies. And also the other way around, if the kids leave here, there's going to be consistency, so they know that student is going to be successful someplace else in the district."*

They have several major concerns, however, with how they are expected to implement the new curricular packages: the lack of integration across subjects in both the reading or math series, the instructional level and pace that is being imposed on their students, and the instructional method that is being imposed on them.

Teachers, regardless of grade level, express feeling frustrated with how poorly the curriculum integrates across subject matters. Elementary school teachers have always prided themselves for their ability to integrate math with science, social studies with English and reading and writing across the board. While they all acknowledge that the

new standards have pushed them to incorporate more reading and writing across the curriculum, the district mandated curricular series in reading, math, social studies, science, and computer has reduced their ability to do so effectively. Many of the teachers explain that pushing for these new standards is not a bad thing. They report working more consciously over the years to integrate the subjects more, to do more writing in all subjects, and to include more critical thinking skills in all subjects. They feel, however, that while the curriculum promotes integration, the different programs do not integrate well with each other. Several teachers explain:

"One of the biggest battles that we've had while developing our curriculum over the years, is that we don't nearly have enough time to do half of what we have to do. So the big word and the big thing that everybody is trying to do is integrate. That is the only way you can begin to approach teaching these days. And so one of the battles we had was making sure that the reading material that we were using was about science or social studies or was something we could use in science or social studies, so that we're doing double duty. And I just have to throw in, as happy as I am to have a standardized curriculum across the district, this new program that they've got, the reading program, has no fourth grade social studies content and no fourth grade science content. None."

"No, none of them do [the different grade levels]."

"So now it's triple the work we have to do. And we are being mandated to do it."

"And it's cut us off at the knees as far as integrating."

Besides the lack of integration across subjects, the teachers across grade levels are concerned that the amount of time they are expected to spend on each lesson, unit or activity is unrealistic, and the level of the math and reading series is often above their students' reading and ability levels. Working with children from where they are has always been their approach to instruction. The former principal describes the teachers' philosophy well: *"One thing that the Hemlock teachers to me continually did is develop appropriate materials for these kids. I mean if there was a fifth grader who needed a second grade reader, they got it. Those teachers stayed there, they came early, and they stayed late. They were constantly developing materials that were appropriate for the kids' learning abilities. They were just working all the time to work with kids at their level."*

Teachers feel deprofessionalized by the messages they get from the district offices 'suggesting' what unit or project they should be beginning or ending in their reading and math programs. But they especially feel wronged when it comes to not being able to physically group and organize their students in different ways for different purposes depending on the lesson, student need, and ability level.

A teacher shares her concern about the rigidity of the curriculum: *"It makes it very difficult because we have a very mobile population and the district, rightly, is trying to deal with that problem. But the way they're dealing with it is trying to keep the*

teachers lockstep so that they can't serve the kids that they have. What that means if the teachers are lockstep is when students transfer schools, as so often happens, they can jump right in and there won't be a gap. And that's a good goal. But rather than expecting the teachers to disregard the needs of their children and adhere to a rigid schedule, they should work on lowering the mobility rate."

Another teacher echoes those sentiments: *"The teachers worked very hard in putting some things together for literacy. A lot of teacher hours went into the curriculum that they produced on their own. And when we got our new reading series it was imposed on us that we do it in the way the district wanted us to be teaching it, which has caused a lot of frustration around the district through all the grade levels, K-5, because to mandate that you're on a certain page in a certain week across the district is unrealistic depending on the kids' abilities. So the teachers here just feel like all we're doing is frustrating our children. We are not teaching them the way that we as professionals should be allowed to help all of our children learn."*

Discussing the reading basal's instructional level and pace, several teachers share their concerns: *"It's regimented. It doesn't necessarily take the needs of the population into account. It's basalized. It's neutralized. There are no thematic connections. They'll throw some centers out, suggestions that you can do but there's no time. It's unrealistic. One of the suggestions recently was to write an animal story to go along with whatever the story was, to do research, look at some animal stories and then write a three or four page little book about your animal. Well that's a great project. They allotted twenty minutes. That's a week-long project. So you know they are unrealistic. It's like they put things in there just to put in, not that you'd necessarily do them."*

"Sooner or later they'll listen to the teachers who are actually teaching it and figure out what to do to make it sensible. I was talking to a first grade teacher the other day who is doing her darndest to follow the program, but her entire class is not developmentally ready for some of the abstract thinking that they have to do according to the program. And that was not well thought out. Somebody did not pay attention to our kinds of kids or kids in general."

"Every teacher is struggling with what he or she was taught theoretically how to teach and what the district is telling them to do."

The superintendent is well aware that some of the district's implementations have taken many people out of their comfort zones. This is especially true about his strong position against pull-out groups for reading and English language arts. The Deputy Superintendent explains: *"There's a lot of commitment to things as they are, when they have not necessarily been successful. So people are concerned with letting go of something that really hasn't served them well."*

The superintendent's position is that reading ability drives everything else and so it is essential to begin with a serious look at how reading is taught. Basing his argument

on research, he articulates several reasons for why pull-out programs are shown to be detrimental for students' academic growth and progress in reading.

The first reason is that pull-out programs position children into groups early on based on who can and who can't. And research has shown that once children have been identified as needing remedial services they tend to be in remedial programs for their entire academic career. Research shows that usually such remedial services are not needed and that poor readers will become good and better readers regardless of the nature of the remedial program. However, more detrimental are the findings that point out that the longer a student is in a pull-out program the more likely there will be an increase in the lag between that remedial student and the regular students in his or her grade. The superintendent knows that some teachers will claim that their pull-out programs have helped raise test scores. He feels that while this may be true, there is nothing to support the notion that a quick hit in 4th grade will benefit the students in the long run. His overall goal is to see a higher rate of students graduate from high school and passing the regents.

Another problem, he sees, from a teaching perspective is that having students come in and out throughout the day means that a continuous instructional program is never or rarely achieved for the entire class and especially for those who miss large portions of it. It inhibits the teacher's ability to form a strong, coherent, continuous program and to know where each student is in his or her learning process. Reading is basic to all subject areas and if a student is taught this skill out of the classroom, the teacher will not know how to cue that student in the other subjects when he or she stumbles in the reading required there. This also increases the likelihood that there will be a loss of responsibility and ownership of that child's learning. The Deputy Superintendent shares her view on this: *"I'm one of the people who strongly believes that the less grouping we do with the kids the better off they are. And I have been a proponent of heterogeneous grouping for a very long time. First of all life is heterogeneously grouped. And when we start pulling people out for different things you start dispersing the responsibility of who's in charge of what happens with them educationally. You start labeling people and people are very often self-fulfilling prophecies."*

The superintendent also acknowledges that his position on pull-out programs does not mean that he believes that all students read at the same level or learn in the same way. He does believe that all children should be instructed together and that each classroom teacher should be the master instructor knowing and understanding his or her students' needs intimately and well. This teacher would then develop the instructional program in the classroom directing the remedial reading, math teachers and other assistants in where they would be most useful. He feels that there is a wonderful opportunity for collaborative teaching when you have several teachers working together.

He is aware that adapting to such an approach has been difficult for teachers, especially older, more experienced teachers. What often happens with teachers who are used to teaching using small pull-out groups, he explains, is that they resort to teaching to the middle, leaving the higher end bored and the lower end lost. As a way of helping teachers acquire the skills of teaching large, differentiated groups of students, the district

has encouraged and provided workshops on differentiated instruction which allows teachers to individualize the instructional needs of individual students while also teaching to the whole class. But while he thinks that differentiated instruction is a useful tool, he doesn't feel it should be the model of instruction for the entire school day.

Strengthening the whole system is important for many reasons. One of the side-effects of such a huge demand on teachers in particular grade-levels is that it is affecting the distribution of the teaching force, leaving in many cases less experienced teachers where there is the highest stress. Using a corporate model to explain what he sees happening since so many educational systems now do to determine the strengths of a system, the superintendent describes a couple of weaknesses in the current system. He explains that corporations wouldn't have their least experienced people in the most critical spots. What is happening around the state and will probably continue to happen since the stakes are so high in 4th grade is that the more experienced teachers are leaving 4th grade. What you have left is your least experienced teachers teaching in the most critical spots. Second, the success of corporations that do well and who stay ahead of the game is often dependent on people who are the most creative and take risks. Again, the superintendent explains that 4th grade teachers are not taking risks. They teach what they think will help students do well on the tests. This is of course a generalization and it is too early to tell what the impact will be, but the superintendent is concerned that such a high test load and stress level in 4th grade will have negative consequences for students beyond academics. Currently the goal for the district is to build a strong standards-based curriculum K - 12 that will benefit students' academic performance overall and should reduce the pressure on students and teachers around state mandated tests.

A threatened partnership

"Do they want to help us or do they want to punish us?" (Hemlock teacher).

One of the biggest effects of the state and district policies around curriculum and instruction is a deep sense of frustration and doubt. While the staff has not ceased to strive for excellence, they do so with the constant fear that their plans will be thwarted or their progress discredited. A Hemlock teacher explains: *"When we had the school-wide process under Title I, the philosophy of the state seemed to be that we were partners in this. The state people who came in and helped us with the SWP committee acted as partners. Now the feeling is that if a state person comes in, they're waiting to find out what you're doing wrong. The idea of a partnership with the state is out the window as far as I'm concerned."*

This doubt permeates the whole school. At an early morning staff meeting the principal leads a discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of the Lesley University Literacy Collaborative that the teachers are considering pursuing to improve reading instruction across their curriculum. The principal needs 80% staff approval on a vote later in the week.

The teachers discuss everything from the availability of graduate credit to its relationship to other grants currently under review by the district, to its advocacy of homogeneous reading groups. But one of the primary questions is: *"If we don't decide to adopt will they decide for us?"* The principal assures the teachers that they don't need to adopt anything they don't want to but they do need to show growth. The teachers, however, are not convinced and there is some definite grumbling, *"They've already imposed programs." "What's to stop them."*

At first the teachers vote the program down feeling that this just isn't the right time to bring such a demanding program into their school. One teacher explains the general mood behind these teacher-driven initiatives: *"We really wanted to do something in school reform just to help bring our school together as a team. This building is not a building that most people in the district would be dying to transfer to. Our poverty is higher; our children are tougher to handle so to speak, so most people once they have a few years transfer out of buildings like this. But we have a staff that has stayed here for a very long time because we worked very well together. We had teams of teachers who were so dedicated to the children and the community. In the last few years that has started to change. People are frustrated. People are aggravated. And part of wanting school reform was to kind of get that fire back underneath people. You know a program that <u>we</u> wanted. A new program that <u>we</u> chose; that wasn't imposed on us like that. So we really wanted to keep the morale around here because it's depressing for some people."*

On the other hand, she explains, not getting involved in something school-wide has the teachers worried that they will be perceived as lazy: *"People are afraid that since we didn't do school reform it is going to come back and haunt us. You know, people are afraid it looks like we don't want to put the work in and it's not that. It's just that I don't believe this was the year personally to undertake that."*

As it turns out, the teachers' hesitation is short lived. With a little persuading from the principal and one of the classroom reduction teachers, the teachers do vote to apply for the Literacy Collaborative. The principal explains that most teachers feel the Literacy Collaborative is *"just plain good teaching, but it's systematized and it's consistent amongst all grades. And I think they agree with the whole philosophy. They were doing that last year, doing pull-outs when they weren't supposed to, so they think they want to go back to that. Literacy Collaborative is going to allow for that more, because right now the push-in model is somewhat difficult [to implement]."*

As far as the superintendent's position on this, the Deputy Superintendent explains: *"He has said yes to that, even if it's not where he would have seen them going. Because the truth is if everybody is committed to the process, that all of these processes have validity."*

The staff and teachers at Hemlock have shown considerable commitment to staff and program improvement. Besides the Literacy Collaborative, they have also applied for a Federal Grant called Reading For Results which is left over from the Clinton administration. RFR is geared to providing funds for two years to specific schools

needing to improve reading skills. Furthermore, a group of teachers have applied for a Honda Motor Corp Science Foundation Grant, which they are hoping to use to equip a science lab for students from all grades to use for science.

Teaching Test-Taking Strategies

> *"We structure our whole day in 4th grade, right up through January, our whole day is structured towards the ELA. And then after that, after the ELA, there will be a shift in focus and then we will be structuring our entire day to focus more on the math and science."* (4th grade teacher)

As stated earlier, one of the primary goals of the new curriculum is to raise the test scores of the students. Teaching test-taking strategies is one way the teachers feel they are doing what is expected of them. Helping their students raise their scores is a number one priority.

It begins in first grade

The teachers at Hemlock understand that they need to work together as a team and support each other across grade levels in an effort to raise their students' performance levels especially as assessed by the 4th grade state tests. A couple of teachers talk about how this responsibility has been taken up by teachers at all grade levels, not just fourth grade:

"Well it's filtered down. I mean those guys [4th grade teachers] not in any kind of brow beating way have let those below them know that they can't do it all by themselves and that it has to start in the third grade. And I think that all of us working with first and second grade, we feel their pain so to speak. And we want to do what we can. So even at the second grade I'm writing questions and creating activities that are geared towards the ELA but on the second grade level, that are kind of scaffolding them towards the ELA."

"Our staff is pretty darn good about that [taking ownership beyond the 4th grade for student achievement]. I think our staff is one of the best at that. Because the effort has started years ago, our staff people, not just the fourth grade teachers, but all the teachers have been taking ownership of this, and more and more as the years go by."

Creating a cohesive test preparation program that all could agree on did not occur without intense and extended discussions among the faculty at Hemlock about what, if any, strategies they should employ to boost the academic achievement and test scores of their 4th grade students. Their biggest dilemma was dealing with the issue of mobility. In a school where the stability rate is only about 65%, the teachers were unsure where to put their energies. The former principal describes this debate: *"When I got there the teachers had a school-wide project and they were very unhappy with the results of the students' scores on the 4th grade ELA test. I remember that first summer working there they were very intent upon doing better and they worked really hard on some strategies to improve*

test scores. And I think it was driven by, every time a list would come out all the elementary schools [would be listed from the top] and then maybe one and then Hemlock or vice versa. And they didn't like that stigma of, you know, we're the lowest performing school in the city or we're the second lowest performing school, because they work hard. And I mean there was a very emotional debate that went on about what to do for the kids to get them to achieve better. And a lot of the issues were, how many resources do you put into a grade level? You only have a limited amount of resources, so how many resources do you put into a particular grade level and, I don't want to use the word suffer, but then the other grade levels lack those resources. And the debate was, you can have a quick fix, one strategy is to go to an elementary school and put all of your resources in grade 4. Hit them hard that year, give them all the teachers you have, reduce class size, you know, throw all the money in grade 4. Well that's the quick fix. My notion is let's take it a little bit at a time. Let's put some of the resources in grade 4, but let's move some down to three, some down to two, some down to one, so eventually you don't have to do that anymore. If you're preparing the kids all the way up along the line, you don't have to take all those resources and put them in grade 4. The problem is the kids in kindergarten, one or two, probably only 20% of them end up in our grade 4 because of the mobility. So the debate is that doesn't make sense. In the altruistic world you say well the kids are going to go somewhere and do better on the test, but we want them to do better here. So that was the debate."

Knowing the test

Studying the test each year has become one way the teachers feel they have some control over their students' performance. The better they know the test, the more able they are to prepare their students. *"The format,"* a teacher explains, *"getting the kids used to the format, how the information is going to be presented to them, is one thing we all strive to do. Getting them used to the types of writing assignments they might encounter is one of the big challenges."*

The teachers have pretty much agreed that knowing the test is important even for teachers who have no state tests to contend with as this first grade teacher attests: *"Well I had no clue as to what you all have to go through for the fourth grade science part. I went to a workshop and they had us walk through exactly what the fourth grade kids were going to do. And it blew my mind, going, oh my gosh, my first graders are going to need to get to this point! And so I'd better do more to get them to that point. And it hit home, because I never really, you know, teaching in the lower grades, knew what the fourth grade test looks like."*

Besides knowing the format of the test and what types of questions the students can expect to see and should be able to recognize, teachers spend time preparing students for how the test is going to be administered. For the ELA and the math tests, which are basic sit-down tests, the teachers prepare the students to work independently and quietly, and to develop strategies that will help them answer their own questions. They do this by modeling real test taking situations as they get closer to the actual event.

For the performance part of the science test even more is involved in preparing students. Because the students at Hemlock are highly distractible and often have a hard time working in pairs or groups, preparing for the performance test involves more than informing the students what to expect on the test. It involves preparing them for what the room will look like, how many tables there are going to be, and what is going to be on each table. The performance component of the NY science test involves hands-on tasks at 5 stations: Liquids, Grouping Objects, Ball and Ramp Game, Magnetic and Electrical Testing, and Unknown Object. Each student does three out of the five, either experiments one, two, and three, or experiments three, four, and five. Students work alone on two of the experiments but work in pairs for experiment three. To prepare these students to work with a partner, the teachers needed to slightly adapt the rules to figure out the best strategy that would enable 20+ students to attend to their test in a small but visually busy environment. So students are briefed beforehand on what to expect and who they will be working with for the one experiment that requires a partner. One teacher explains to her students this process: *"I have to tell you that the Wednesday morning test is more of a reading test rather than a science test. It gives you directions that you need to read. If you read them in order and do what they say in order you will ace it. The way it is organized some kids will do 1, 2, and 3, and some kids will do 3, 4, and 5, so everybody will do number 3. Now on Wednesday I am going to have a seating chart on the table so you will know exactly where you will sit and exactly what you are going to do. Remember when you are in this room you are working by yourself. When you do experiment 3, you are going to be working with a partner (exasperated sighs by students). Now it will not be your science partner. It will be whoever it works out you're with. It might be your best friend or your worst enemy. It doesn't matter. It shouldn't matter because you only have 15 minutes to read the directions and do what it says."*

Knowing the tests also means analyzing the test items, the students' performance on each item, and the overall content of the tests. The belief that the more you know about achievement tests, the better you can prepare people has pushed the fourth grade and reading teachers to develop a strategy for analyzing the tests each year at the time of their administration. *"Because,"* as one teacher put it, *"it's just like any achievement test or regents, the more you get used to the types of questions and what they're looking for, the better you can do."*

At the end of each testing period, the students are given time to color, play board games or play on the computers. The teachers gather the tests and make a chart to record the students' scores. They quickly compare notes on how hard they felt the test was and how well their students did. Question by question, the teachers analyze the test questions and results. For the ELA this year the teachers recorded five types of questions: inference, purpose, sequence, detail, and main idea. Then they do a quick scoring of each student and how each one did on each question so that they can learn which questions the students had the hardest time on. That way they can cover those better next year. One of the reading teacher remarks that this year there were several questions asking about the author's purpose and she hadn't covered this well with the students.

For the math test instruction is done around 7 key math ideas: Mathematical Reasoning, Number and Numeration, Operations, Measurement, Uncertainty, Patterns, and Modeling/Multiple Representation. This year, the teachers felt that the math test was much harder than they had ever seen. According to them there were few straight computation questions and a lot of questions dealing with probabilities, fractions and percentages.

The 4th grade teachers feel that while they know everything they need to know about the format of the test, there is still one area in which they feel disadvantaged; the actual weight each question carries towards the overall score is kept entirely secret. This secrecy prevents teachers from being able to guide students into making good decisions about time management and focus.

Another test preparation process that teachers engage in includes the thorough analysis of the curriculum and district series in each subject. For example in science, one of the 4th grade teachers spent a considerable amount of time analyzing what is addressed and covered in the STC kits and what is being left out of those kits but still needs to be covered and taught for the science exam. In this way she was able to identify how topics like magnetism are not taught anywhere and worked to develop and purchase items to create a magnetism kit for all the teachers to use.

A teacher explains how a teacher in another school in the district took the initiative to go through a similar process for the math series: *"A couple of years ago or maybe last year, somebody went through the Everyday Math program and found all of the essential skills for the test which don't come up in the Everyday Math program until after the test even if you are on schedule. And we jump ahead and teach those out of sequence just to get them in before the test."*

Practice – practice – practice

Whatever the subject, whatever the test, the primary means of preparation used by teachers is to have students practice their skills over and over on previously released state tests or by using test preparation material such as 'Blast Off' for all subjects or for math the 'Comprehensive Math Assessment' put out by Options Publishing. The closer the students get to the actual test, the more likely their practice sessions will take on the actual test administration format down to the time allotted for each section and restricting student movement out of the room.

One teacher describes her preparation approach for the 4th grade science test given in May: *"In the back of the room we have already done a couple of packets where they have model questions just like we did for the ELA. We're going to do the multiple choice questions, we'll be working on them between now and the time we take the test. And when we get closer to the test we're going to do a lot more hands-on experiments where they have to read and conduct the experiment on their own."*

Aside from such subject specific skills as the vocabulary needed to do well on the science test and the actual computational skills needed for the math test, there seem to be particular skills and strategies that are important to test taking that go beyond subject matter and are emphasized in the practice sessions I observed at Hemlock. For example in one of the math groups, a week before the test the math teacher (MT) is working with ten students on a practice test:

MT: *"You are going to take each sentence individually. I want you to dissect it and make a picture of each sentence."*

After they read quietly for awhile.

S: *"I don't get it."*

MT: *"Do it sentence by sentence."*

When a student tries to erase one problem, the teacher tells him not to.

MT: *"There will be no erasing on the test…. Keep everything on the page. The people scoring want to see your work. If you just show the answer you'll only get partial credit… When you see big spaces like that they want you to show your work."*

Similarly, right before the objective part of the science test which is comprised of 45 multiple choice questions, a teacher asks: *"What do we do to answer multiple choice questions?"*

S: *"Read the questions carefully. Read the answers carefully. Cross out the silly ones. Pick the best answer."*

Over and over, similar instructions are repeated: 'Read all of the question.' 'Read it in order.' 'If you don't get it the first time, reread it.' 'Take the question one sentence at a time and figure out the important clues.' 'If you don't understand a word try to understand it from the context or look for clues in the other questions and answer choices.' 'Underline, circle the important clues.' 'Do this fast.' 'Do this neatly.' 'Show your work.' 'Do not erase.' 'Do not work in your head.'

The 4th grade teachers and math and reading teachers pretty much agree that the primary skills students need in order to do well on the tests is attending and organizing. How and how well a student reads the questions will impact how well they address that question. Reading thoroughly is a different skill than just reading. In fact, even good readers can do poorly on a test because they skim right over important details and a poor reader can do well if they take their time. After the objectives part of the science test, one 4th grade teacher tells me: *"Our low readers are either done first or last depending on effort."* Attention, organization, motivation and effort are all important ingredients for taking tests. And as these excerpts from the ELA training will show are interwoven throughout the other skills.

Excerpt 1

Her arms overflowing with packets of practice tests, the reading teacher walks up the two flights of steps, resting momentarily to catch her breath or balance her water. The students are waiting as she enters the 4th grade classroom. There are 26 students in this

class and little room left to move between desks. The reading teacher (RT) greets the teacher (T) as well as the paraprofessional (P). She plops her packets down, takes a deep breath, a sip of water, and then begins.

RT: "*Today we are going to work on the listening, Day 2. Here's how the listening procedure goes. The teacher reads the story once through. You are not allowed to take notes. What you should be doing in your mind while listening to the story is to do some organizing in your brain. What are some of the ways we organize*?"
S: "*The sequence*."
RT: "*What do we usually ask you in our graphic organizers*."
S: "*What's happening at the beginning, middle, and the end*."
RT: "*That's the sequence. What do we ask you*?"
S: "*Setting*."
RT: "*And setting means what*?"
S: "*Where and when*."
RT: "*What next*?"
S: "*The main idea*."
RT: "*What else*?"
S: "*Main characters*."
RT: "*What else do we ask you*?"
S: "*How many characters*."
RT: "*We have that already. Wake up. It starts with a P*."
S: "*A problem*."
RT: "*Yea we'll get to that in a minute*."
S (stretching arm way high): "*Plot*."
T: "*Good job*."
(…)
RT: "*The second time that the teacher tells the story you will be taking notes. Notes are not complete sentences. Just take notes. How do notes get organized*?"
S: "*In a sequence*."
RT: "*First you listen, then what do you do*?"
S: "*Pay attention*."
RT: "*You've done that. Start thinking. We're getting ready to take notes. What should your brain be doing*?"
S: "*Functioning*."
RT: "*It should be doing that all the time*."
S: "*Plot*."
RT: "*Organizing. You have to have a way to organize your notes. On your test you will not have a way to organize your notes. For today we made one for you*."

The reading teacher raises her voice. She is pointed. Direct. She tells students to sit up straight. She demands attention. Talking out of turn, calling out answers, doing something else are all behaviors that are stopped immediately. Every act of disengagement is noticed and the behavior is corrected. The pace is fast, the answers expected. Several students raise their hands but the reading teacher waits, always waiting until most hands are up before calling on anyone. Leaving those who know the answer

disappointed if they can't share it or reprimanded if they blurt it out because holding it in is too difficult to do.

Excerpt 2

There are 20 students in this 4th grade class today. One reading teacher is there (RT) as well as the classroom teacher (T) and a paraprofessional (P). The students are looking over a practice test with questions based on reading a passage. They are being asked to determine what kind of question it is and then find the clues for their answers in the text.

RT: "*What is question 3*? (pause) *Come on you should know this*. (pause) *It's a short answer question.*"
S: "*Oh I forgot about that*."
RT: "*What clues do you have that it's a short answer question*?"
S: "*You have to write it*."
P: "*You don't do any circling. You have to write in sentences*."
RT: "*How much do you have to write*?"
S: "*No more than three sentences*."
RT: "*No you can write more. See how much room they give you. No more than that. How do you start your answer*?"

The teacher is watching as some of the students practically fall out of their chairs they are stretching their arms so high. She looks at one girl and comments proudly: "*I know you know it.*"

The reading teacher turns to the teacher and asks: "*Do you want to call on someone*?"

The teacher turns to a student near the back and asks: "*Is your hand up? Ok tell us*."
S: "*Write something from the question*."
T: "*Very nice*."
RT: "*Beautiful. Give an example*."
S: "*The lesson this fable teaches us*…"
RT: "*Then what*?"
S: "*Details*."
RT: "*Not just details, you need to answer the question*."
They turn to the next question.
RT: "*What kind of question is it? Read it*."

The students read the question and then raise their hands. RT calls on one of them.
S: "*Vocabulary*."
P: "*Did we see all hands up with that*?"
RT: "*Almost. Ok, what about number 5*?"
S: "*A detail question*."
RT: "*Ok, number 6. What kind of question is number 6? I should get 100% on 6*."

She waits patiently for more hands to get raised. Meanwhile there are always students who raise their hands immediately and can barely restrain themselves as she waits. She rarely praises but rather repeats a question in a more exasperated voice. She

has high expectations that they will be able to pull from their heads the answer to the questions she throws out. She works sequentially repeating lessons after lesson in drill-like fashion, pumping the same muscles over and over, hoping that what is written on the page will produce immediate recognition. Finally she calls on a student.
S: "*Sequence*."
RT: "*Yes a sequence question. Let me go over number 6. Sometimes when they ask you to tell what happened last they want only what happened last in the story. This one is not like that. This happens somewhere in the beginning. I had to number them in the sequence they happened to determine which happened last even though it is near the beginning of the story. Ok, number 7. Read this.*"

She gives them time to read.
RT: "*What do you have to do to find the correct answer*? (pause) *A lot of you had trouble with this*. (Two hands are up. She waits). *You are going to get a question like this. Read it. It is really not a hard question. Most of you got this question wrong*."

She calls on a student who has her hand up. The girl is asked to stand up and come right up front of the class and tell the class clearly.
S: "*To find out what he did not do you find everything he did do*."

She congratulates the girl and asks her to sit down. Then she calls on a student who did not raise his hand.
RT: "*Come up. I'll put you on the spot. What do you do to answer this question*?"
Boy: "*You have to learn what he did do to find what he did not do*."
RT: "*What is the most important word in that question? A lot of you will skip right over it.*"
T: "*No they won't*!"

What is obvious is that ELA is not a time to explore the many facets of language arts, it is a time for drill and skill. It is not a time for teacher and student interaction or even to answer student questions. Methodologically and sequentially, the reading teacher directs each classroom on the explicit and implicit expectations of the test. From classroom to classroom she carries an armload of prep tests. She spends at least 4 hours a week in each of the 4th grade classrooms and 3 hours in the 3rd grades. After the ELA, she will stop servicing the 4th grades and for the rest of the year will double her time in the third grades.

Challenges, challenges, challenges

What hurt the teachers this year is that their entire ELA training program was developed upon the assumption of the strengths of small group instruction. When the district mandated that no such pull-out programs could continue, the teachers adapted to whole group instruction as best they could. So in all fairness to the teachers at Hemlock the above excerpts do not adequately convey what they wished their design to look like. Rather they convey part of the frustration felt by these teachers about the program they ran this year.

One reading teacher explains her frustration about working with the whole classroom this year: *"I really wasn't satisfied with it this year. Basically they had to learn*

certain skills and there is only so much room in that classroom and as far as I'm concerned I always use a chalkboard. I can't get away from that. I can't teach without a chalkboard. So basically you have to have one focus and yes, I ended up teaching a major portion of the curriculum. So what you have is you have two other competent teachers there walking around, but you don't have three competent teachers teaching. You have one person teaching and you're not using your other staff appropriately and I don't know the answer to that. I really don't." Furthermore, she is exhausted from having to go up and down three flights of stairs several times a day lugging huge piles of magazines around, often wasting time because a group of magazines is misplaced.

The reading and 4th grade teachers all feel that the situation this year did not go as well as last year's and may even have had a negative effect on the quality of the teaching and the learning of the students. As one teacher explains: *"The advanced students, the students reading at grade level or above are not challenged, they're bored, and they have every right to be bored. The students reading below what you're reading at are totally confused and they tune out, and they have every right to tune out because they cannot, they have extreme difficulty reading what we're giving them. Kids in the middle maybe, maybe, but what happens when you have an entire group like that and you have some bright students, they end up doing all the answering of the questions, and the middle and the lower students end up sitting there because they don't have to do anything. And so it's very difficult to get them to start exercising their brains."*

But there are other issues as well; issues the teachers speak less of when it comes to the ELA program this year. Having three or four teachers work together in one classroom can be difficult depending on the personalities and teaching styles of the individuals. For the most part all the teachers involved this year have gotten along extremely well and approach their responsibility as a team willing to support and assist each other as need be. The reading teachers and the 4th grade teachers for example often consult with each other looking over the planned program and adjusting it in ways they feel best meet the needs of their particular classes. This does not mean that they agree about everything. The teachers expressed several differences among themselves. For example one teacher explained that while the reading teacher was more drill and skill, she was more experiential: *"I believe that real learning occurs during the processes of writing. Rewriting is the best writing. When you rewrite you can really put an effort into making everything shine. That's the kind of writing I want to see on the ELA. Thinking about each part as you write. Not just following a formula."* As a result, they often disagree about things like the purpose of the planning page, which the teacher feels students would learn how to use in the process of writing their essay, whereas the reading teacher feels they need to understand its structure before writing their essays.

Similarly, another teacher comments about her differences with one of the reading teachers explaining that the two in combination work well with the children: *"We have philosophical differences on teaching styles and discipline. I tend to be a more writing process person. She is more focused on getting ready for the test and there is no writing, revising, and editing on the test so she feels that other stuff is a waste of time. She is stricter. I am more whole child. I worry about stomachaches and whether they are feeling*

good or poorly. It's a nice dichotomy. We argue all the time and then compromise. She is extremely strict. If they are not attending, they are not learning."

Some teachers feel that this strictness has a negative impact on the students' learning and relationship to the ELA, as one teacher comments: *"The kids worry about the ELA already so much because everybody makes such a big deal out of it. And they know it's E-L-A time when she [a reading teacher] comes in and she's very strict with the kids and she scares them and they don't want to do the lesson."*

The reading teacher in question is aware of these differences and explains why being focused and attending are essential to good learning: *"My first year of teaching and I had no student teaching was in the middle of Harlem. I had some very good mentors and they always emphasized to me that you get control before you try to teach. And that has been my guiding principle; you have control and you have to have focus. What's the purpose of teaching if the kids are not focused? Because then you end up and you saw it many, many times, you end up teaching it and as soon as you get to the assignment they have no concept of what to do because they haven't been focused at all while you've been teaching."*

For some teachers, especially in the lower grades, giving classroom time over to the reading teachers has been frustrating especially since they feel they have not had a say in what ELA looks like in their classrooms: "*We don't decide what is taught during that time. It's all reading teacher.*" Furthermore, having the reading teacher direct the ELA has also meant that the teachers are left standing idly by. As one teacher explains: "*I'm useless for an hour and I don't need to be*." On the other hand, when asked how they would like to be involved in the planning or teaching of the ELA, these teachers express being grateful for the reading teachers' work and admit to having little extra time to devote to helping in its development. For all the teachers, however, having the reading teachers coordinate and conduct these scheduled lessons has meant that the teachers have found themselves left without much resource if the reading teacher is late or absent. They sometimes find themselves singing songs or having students read quietly, not being able to start anything new until they know what is going on. Then they quickly substitute something else because the teachers themselves don't have the materials for the ELA.

The reading teachers understand the effect the program has had on the teachers and on the students. They agree that overall it has not worked well in a large classroom where too much time is wasted making sure all the students are paying attention and are on the same page. The teachers explain that in the past being able to work in small groups has meant that teachers are more relaxed with students and can relate on a personal basis allowing for more directed instruction guided by the needs and strengths of individual students, which in turn motivates students to do better. One of the consequences of having to adapt quickly to a new instructional structure is that all the teachers involved do not feel as if they've had adequate time to sit back to evaluate the pros and cons of the imposed upon structure. For the most part the teachers have felt frustrated this year with their inability to find meaningful ways to assist each other in a consistent and active way in the classroom. The teachers all know that next year will bring a whole new scenario as

both reading teachers are retiring. The 3rd and 4th grade teachers plan to use the reading series for ELA prep but are not yet sure what the program will look like as a whole.

A Valid, Reliable and Fair Assessment Program?

> *"Nobody wants to teach 4th grade any more. And everybody is saying it's all on the 4th grade teachers, and some people are saying 'oh no, it's not the 4th grade teachers, it's everybody below them.' We're starting to hear, 'well you guys should have prepared them for this because you're in 4th grade.' And maybe they should have, but it's all the way from when they're born. It's the parents at home before they come to school. It's the kindergarten through third grade teachers. It's the way their home life is during that whole entire time. And then in 4th grade it's how well they test."* (Hemlock teacher)

There are many issues that are not taken into account in the reporting of scores that affect the validity purported by the state. For example, a perfect atmosphere and a perfect performance is not achieved during the course of the ELA. Multiple interruptions break the flow each day as people unaware that the test is still in progress knock innocently at the door. A pencil drops at the beginning of the second reading of the listening passage and then a ruler causing the teacher to stumble over her words as she reads. The teacher quietly takes the ruler away and continues to read. She does not feel she is allowed to start over even if that might have been a better option as the students are obviously distracted. The three-day event turns into five as a snow day and then a delay push the third section of the test into the next week. The students arrive on the third day tired, hoarse and sniffling from the extended weekend. They are agitated when they find out the test is not over. Two students fall asleep and several more are visibly tired.

The district strategy seems simple enough, endorse the state's Standards for All Students plan, follow up with curricular programs that are well aligned with these standards, create a calendar for each subject matter to keep teachers on schedule and on target, use the district and state assessments to help define and determine program and instructional gaps, and train teachers to fill those gaps. The district of course is realistic about the multiple and complex needs of its school personnel and population and the Comprehensive District Education Plan offers a much more comprehensive look at the variety of initiatives working together to address those needs. But in the lives of the teachers and students at Hemlock, there are real needs right now that impact their daily routines and cause substantial variation on the state test scores; variations that can mean huge consequences for a school like Hemlock.

For example, the teachers at Hemlock all comment on the bad absentee problem and high mobility rate. During the school year between October 1, 2001 and May 24, 2002, 60 students, 10 of them 4th graders, transferred out of Hemlock while 102 new students were enrolled, 19 of them 4th graders. The impact on a system is significant. Not only does it mean that a whole classroom has to readjust itself for each new presence but daily instructional routines are disrupted continuously as a new student's ability, content

knowledge, and skills are assessed for each subject that is taught. The impact on test scores is significant not so much because each new student may lower or raise the classroom level, but because instruction is usually cumulative and a teacher can never be sure what a student has covered and what he or she hasn't.

Absenteeism also impacts the ability of teachers to prepare students. When students are absent for large portions of each unit and teachers aren't able to take them out to catch them up individually or in small groups, everyone misses out. The students who are having trouble following need extra attention or become disruptive as their frustration levels reach unbearable levels. The students who have been present are bored and held back and are also more likely to become disruptive, as they often need to wait for long periods of time. Furthermore the tests are supposed to help teachers and districts assess the strengths and weaknesses of the school's curricular program and teaching staff. That process is significantly hampered if only a small portion of students who take the 4th grade tests in any given year may have attended Hemlock since kindergarten and those who have attended may have missed large portions of instruction due to absenteeism.

It's a good test

The teachers at Hemlock are definitely familiar with how the ELA, math, science, and social studies tests are structured and scored. They have analyzed the items extensively, understand what is required by the students and on what criteria their work will be judged, and so when they say it's a good test, it is important to consider the reasons teachers give for why they believe this. Here I look at six reasons teachers have given for why it is a good test: (1) it's a good goal to strive for; (2) it promotes critical thinking; (3) it encourages students to apply what they've learned; (4) it fosters consistency across grade levels and between schools; (5) it holds teachers accountable; and (6) it can be ammunition against negative reviews or reputations.

(1) It's a good goal to strive for

The teachers and staff at Hemlock believe that one reason the district adopted curricular materials that are above the level of their students is to force in some way higher standards upon the teachers and therefore the students; higher standards which are then supposedly measured by the state tests. Most teachers and parents agree that striving for higher standards is a good thing. As one teacher comments: *"As a person in fourth grade who has studied the ELA test, the science test and the math test, very, very critically and very, very hard, and I have corrected them all. They are good tests in general. Now let me speak specifically of the ELA test. It's a good test. It tests listening, reading and writing at an appropriately high level. It's a good thing to strive for. It's a good goal we should all have."*

One of the reading teachers explains how the level of the test helps drive the level of instruction: *"The nature of the test itself strives for higher order thinking skills and so therefore in our training program the emphasis has been changed from the lower level thinking skills such as recall and detail to the higher level skills. That's a benefit. Another*

benefit is that we focus on writing much earlier than we used to because it used to be a fifth grade test. Again due to the nature of the test we've gone from filling in the missing word which is a former emphasis to understanding main idea, inference, conclusions, and predicting. And those are all higher level skills. So the result for the students is that they are getting a much higher level of instruction now than they used to. I really feel that when we are training for the ELA we are giving a higher level instruction. And to that extent the emphasis is positive."

Overall having something to strive for is received positively by the teachers, as one explains: *"We need something to strive for. It doesn't always get reached, but at least it's something there to say 'this is where we need to go.'"*

(2) It promotes critical thinking

Most teachers endorse the New York standards' emphasis on higher order thinking or critical thinking skills. The state tests in that they promote such skills are seen as contributing to teaching these skills especially to students who may not have such skills emphasized in their home environments. One teacher explains: "*Our kids, especially the ones from lower socioeconomic backgrounds haven't had training in metacognition, higher-order critical thinking skills. The ELA is a good part of developing that aspect of our kids. The ELA has forced us to look at our curriculum. Because higher thinking skills are hard for our kids to grasp, it would be easy for us not to push ourselves to teach them those too much. I think the ELA has forced us to focus on higher thinking skills.*"

Some researchers have conceptualized critical thinking as careful argumentation and believe that training for it would involve critical reading and discussion rather than rote learning. One of the reading teacher describes what these higher thinking skills look like and how these skills are different from, for example the PEP test which focused on one specific skill, filling in blanks in a text with the correct word. She explains: *"The ELA is much more holistic, much, much more holistic. The students have to do a lot more thinking. They have to look back at the text much more carefully. The questions tend to be much more higher order thinking skills that means more interpretation, more drawing conclusion, more predicting as opposed to just straight detail questions, you know what was the color of the wagon or something like that. And if it's a detail question, generally for the ELA they would have to look at more than one part of the story, which is a higher level, so it's taking the detail level up into a higher level thinking skill. They have to pay much more careful attention to what they are reading. Generally there are a lot of inference questions, context questions, main idea questions, predicting questions, as opposed to just simple detail questions. And of course there's the writing component which was never in any of the previous achievement tests."*

What the teachers at Hemlock are teaching is different in form and content to what would be typically seen in a reading or English language art's class. Whether the skills needed to do well on the test and higher order thinking skills are the same ones is

still worth considering as we find out more about how the tests are effecting the nature of teaching and learning.

(3) It encourages students to apply what they've learned

Several teachers explain that one reason it is a good test is that having to write out their answers as opposed to simply finding the correct one pushes students to apply their thinking and to show their reasoning. In fact, one of the biggest challenges for students at Hemlock is not so much in the area of writing mechanics as it is in showing through their writing that they understood the question. One of the reading teacher explains: *"This is a big issue. That they could read a question and answer <u>the</u> question as opposed to just writing something that may not have had something to do with the question. That is still our biggest problem is that the kids read it and they answer a question and it's not the question that's being asked. That is still a problem, understanding a question and directing your answer to the question specifically, and then providing textual evidence from the story. The students tend to address other issues than the issue that's being addressed in the question."*

On the other hand, the teachers do see evidence that students are learning to apply different reading and writing strategies in other contexts. For example, when the scores for the 5th grade social studies test came back, one of the 5th grade teachers commented that the students did better than she thought they would, especially since she and the other 5th grade teacher had purposefully not prepped the students so as to create a base-line for future comparison. There were many 3s and 4s. She felt that the students' success could be attributed to two factors: (a) the state is getting better and more consistent in how they are designing the tests as well as making them more grade appropriate. And (b) since the social studies exam resembled in many aspects the ELA most students were able to apply strategies they learned for the ELA. For example, she saw a lot of underlining in the text and students referring back to the text for information to answer the questions.

(4) It fosters consistency across grade levels and between schools

One of the effects of teaching to the test is adopting test preparation programs that are then applied across classrooms and schools. For a new teacher at Hemlock, this standardization went even further than what she had been used to. She comments: *"I have noticed that there is definitely an emphasis on the testing and getting the kids ready. And having talked with other teachers trying to work out scheduling or switching specials today or 'that's my time,' you know, practice the test time, or ELA time, and that just kind of threw me because having taught in other districts they don't specify a time when to practice for a test, it's kind of left up to the individual teachers. So I think that putting that focus where everybody is teaching those skills is making it more consistent throughout the school."*

(5) It holds teachers accountable

Several teachers have mentioned that the standardized tests push those teachers who may not automatically teach what needs to be taught to do so and those teachers who already teach well to strive to do even better. For students who attend a school like Hemlock, the tendency to teach lower level skills is one that teachers have acknowledged is a reality and the standardized tests is one way that 'slackers,' as one teacher described them, would be identified and if necessary reassigned or assisted. One 4th grade teacher explains: *"The benefits are that in a school like this, in an inner city school where you're dealing with so many difficulties, the standards, what you strive for, the goals I think do slip if you don't have a very well-defined standard to hold yourself to. I can be very confident that my children who are passing the ELA would also pass the ELA if they went to a (higher achieving school). No one can look down his or her nose at my kids who are passing because that standard is a very well-defined standard. And I think that that benefits children in an inner city school in the way that other people look at them. If they meet the standard, yes they're that good. So that's a benefit."*

(6) It can be ammunition against negative reviews or reputations

Similar to the idea that a standardized test score can boost the image of a student who comes from a low performing school and carry with them a preconceived image of failure and lower ability, the teachers at Hemlock are very cognizant and sensitive about the reputation their school holds as a low performing school. Being able to show others that despite many contextual challenges, their students are able to perform just as well or better than other comparable schools, is viewed positively by the teachers. One comments: *"That's one of the things I like about the testing is that it keeps us all on the same page. They can't look at Hemlock school and say, 'Oh those people don't have the same standards.' We all have the same standards now and I like that because it turns out that our kids are just as smart as their kids. It turns out that our teachers are great and now we have proof. And that's pretty neat."*

And another: *"I think that it adds more value to what it means to be a teacher, because you're really working towards certain goals that were set. And saying, I can meet those goals, rather than turning your back on them and saying, 'no, I'm not going to do this.'"*

What should a test do that would make one a good test and another not so good? Besides critical thinking and providing students with multiple resources and strategies they can use across subject matters, most of the reasons teachers give for the test being a good test do not relate directly to teaching and learning. They seem to be held more as measures of accountability and worth with little connection to what teachers believe create good educational environments for students.

Or is it?

> *"My biggest issue with this is that one test doesn't tell you what a child knows, bottom line. It doesn't tell what they learned. It doesn't tell you their ability, and when somebody has a bad day, they score poorly on the test, and it doesn't reflect their knowledge. And I think if they're going to change the system, they need to find a way to encompass some more knowledge-base than just one test on one day, hit or miss, that's your score."* (Hemlock parent).

Just as the reasons for why a test is considered a good test may not really address how well the test is measuring what it is intending to measure, reasons for why a test is not considered a good test may not be clearly defined or may not be specifically about the characteristics of a test but may overlap with the general practice of testing. Some of the reasons given by teachers for why they believe that a particular test or testing is not good overlap with their general complaints (spoken about earlier) about the challenges they face integrating and covering all the necessary aspects of their curriculum. Other reasons teachers and parents give for why a test and testing should be looked at more critically are: (1) it runs the risk of completely missing the main reasons why children do well or poorly on tests; (2) it may be culturally biased and miss the successes of large groups of people who may not share similar cultural environments; (3) it discriminates against large groups of students who may not share similar cognitive proclivities; (4) the scoring process may add to that discrimination; (5) it narrows what is taught and how the material is actually learned; and (6) it emphasizes a pass/fail mentality.

(1) It runs the risk of completely missing the main reasons why children do well or poorly on tests

Children by their very natures work at different paces. While one child dives into the work and can write a page in very little time, other children sit there and think about their topic or put off thinking about it as long as possible finding other things to do like sharpening their pencils or straightening their desk tops until the inevitable catches up to them. This is evident in the ways in which students tackle practice section after practice section. On one such occasion, a prompt asking for an essay response has several students blocked. They sigh audibly, raising their hands only to get quick tips from their teacher like, "take the question one line at a time and get the first sentence written." This doesn't seem like a satisfactory solution to several of the students who now stare at the question, write a word, just to erase it over again.

Prewriting rituals or procrastinating are just some of the many facets of performance that has little to do with the actual content and quality of the students' responses. Once started, students continue to work at different paces, some needing less time while others need more. For many of the students there simply isn't enough time to decode the reading passages, the questions, and write their answers. Being slower does not automatically mean less able but that's how the teachers see the impact of the time

constraint. As one teacher states: *"What's the big deal if he or she takes _ hour or another students takes 2 hours? The question is: Does the student understand the story?"*

One of the fourth grade teacher shares how several of her students would probably perform a lot better given an extra amount of time. She states: *"(U) will work his heart out for you. He'll do his absolute best. I tried to get 504 plans to help some of these guys address these issues. The first student up for CST [Child Study Team], it might have been (K), I'm not exactly sure. The school social worker wanted to know: "What's the disability that classifies him?" Well the disability is that he grew up in nowhere, nohow, noplaceville, and does not process information. These guys are developmentally delayed easily a year below in self-actualization, psychologically, whatever, they are not half as developed as other kids their age. I don't have any research to base that on. It's just my personal observations. But I know (U), and if you give (U) that extra half hour, it will be the difference in him being a two and a three, if you want an accurate measurement of what he can do, period. (K), same thing."*

In fact the test penalizes students who are willing to work but work at slower paces, or spend more time working neatly and accurately. Reading fluency is another factor that contributes to some students doing better than others. Many of the teachers feel that the reading ability of the student is one of the skills measured in all the tests whether the ELA, math or science. As one teacher comments: *"If they can't read, they can't do it. They can't do the math. They can't do the science. They need to be able to do that reading, even the science test where they have to walk around."*

Finally there is the issue of vocabulary. When a whole section is answered incorrectly due to a lack of knowledge of one word, what understanding is gained of that child's academic ability? Why isn't the use of a dictionary allowed? Teachers share many stories of students not being able to answer a question because of one word. As one teacher remembers: *"I remember there was a question about a door, a stoop, they used the word stoop for a step in front of a house, and the kids had no idea what a stoop was. And I remember a lot of kids got that question wrong on the ELA because they just didn't know."*

And just this year during the ELA, the new girl who kept asking the teacher for help didn't know what the words 'raven' or 'goose' meant. In that section she was supposed to write a letter to the governor to argue for or against the raven as a state bird. This essay asks students to write a letter expressing their <u>own</u> opinion but drawing from the two sources. She must have understood at least that it was about writing a letter because she wrote a letter addressed "Dear Raven," And it went something like "How are you? I hope you are having fun. I am happy we are friends. Bye."

(2) It may be culturally biased and miss the successes of large groups of people who may not share similar cultural environments

There is growing evidence that understanding and being able to make inferences are context and culturally bound. Many of the students at Hemlock do demonstrate 4th

grade level reading skills and comprehension and are able to retell a story in the correct sequence or answer questions based on the content of the story. However, many of these same students have difficulty coming up with the expected answer on questions of motive, intent, or feeling. As one teacher expressed: "*Their cultural experiences are different. There are a lot of questions these students don't relate to in the same way we expect them to relate. For example in the story of the man who kills the goose who lays golden eggs, many of the students answered that it is stupid to kill the goose and lose the money because now you're not going to be able to buy food. The proper moral was greed doesn't pay*."

In another example, 3rd graders are reading a story of a little girl whose father tells her she can't go outside to play in the snow because she is still recovering from a cold. During the story the father goes up to the girl's room where she is pouting to offer her some hot cocoa. When the reading teacher asks the children what that tells you about the father, students answer:
S: "*The dad likes to stay inside*."
S: "*He's making her hot cocoa*."
S: "*The dad is home that day*."

Even after she asks them to tell her what kind of a person that makes him, the students find it difficult to come up with a character trait, i.e. "he is a nice person," preferring to focus on the event or action.

And in another example:
RT: "*Ok they are asking for a problem. They are not asking for an entire story. How many characters have problems*?"
S: "*Two*."
RT: "*How many problems*?"
S: "*Two*."
RT: "*So what are you going to do? How many problems are you going to answer?"*
S: *"One problem for each character.*"
RT: "*One problem for each character. And if you do that you've answered the question*."
The reading teacher leads the students into developing a model for answering this question and insists that they start each of their answers with Mrs. Fitch's problem is….
RT: "*What is Mrs. Fitch's problem*?"
S: "*Mrs. Fitch's problem is that she's mean*."
RT: "*Yes, but that's not a problem. I am the meanest teacher here but I love it so it's not a problem. I want to know what the problem is*?"
S: "*Mrs. Fitch's problem is that she has no customers*."
RT: "*Thank you. That is a problem. Who can name another one, using the model*?"
S: "*Mrs. Fitch's problem is that no one will go to her bakery*."
RT: "*We already have that one*."
S: "*Mrs. Fitch's problem is that she stole the customers*."
RT: "*Is that a problem*?"
S: "*It's a problem because it didn't come out right*."
RT: "*Ok. Are we done*?"
S: "*No*."

RT: "*Why*?"
S: "*We need to list Mr. Grady's problems*."
RT: "*Use the model. What could possibly be his problem*?"
S: "*Mr. Grady's problem is that Mrs. Fitch stole his recipe*."
RT: "*Can there be another problem*?"
S: "*Mr. Grady's problem is he's jealous*."
RT: "*That's not a problem*."
S: "*Mrs. Fitch was mean and Mr. Grady was nice but Mrs. Fitch was after Mr. Grady*."
RT: "*Yes that's a problem*."

Many of the students do understand what the reading teacher is looking for or at least guess correctly, but the issue here is not so much whether students can be taught to infer the correct answer. The issue is whether or not it disadvantages and even discriminates against certain students to force certain inferences over others. This is not the only time I witnessed the notion of 'problem' being interpreted as a character flaw when the correct answer seems to point to 'problem' as being an action-reaction kind of relation. Maybe it is a problem to be mean or jealous as seen through the eyes of these children.

(3) It discriminates against large groups of children who may not share similar cognitive proclivities

For many teachers the notion that all students are expected to achieve the same level of academic ability flies in the face of common sense and harms the aspirations of large groups of people who may not desire or have the capability to meet those standards.

One teacher shares her concern: *"I think that [the tests are] harmful for the children who are the "slow learners". And I have several of them in this class who are not special ed, they just have very, very low IQs. And I don't care what the commissioner says, a kid with a 70 IQ is not going to pass the regents, period. I look around, I look at this classroom, these are children who are struggling against everything, and every path they're given they fail at. Now how long is it going to be before they give up? If it was up to me, if there was no such thing as the test, I would be giving them challenges but at their instructional level. And I would be moving slowly enough so that they could learn it properly. What they learned they would really learn. They would never learn as much because we would be moving more slowly but what they did learn they would learn. They wouldn't be constantly feeling confused and failing at every single thing they did. But we have to keep that pace, and the state has basically shut their eyes. They just don't want to know. No one is going to acknowledge this problem until they see the huge increase of those children dropping out when they're sixteen. And the system is making no provision to help those children. And yes all children can learn but all children are not going to be Stephen Hawking. All children are not going to learn calculus nor do they need to. All children do not need to read Shakespeare, you know. I think that is extremely harmful to a whole third of our population who don't want to be scholars. They want to do something else with their lives and there are lots of other important, worthwhile and satisfying jobs to be done in the world that don't require scholars. And to say that this is*

the standard that all people have to meet is very unfair. And you start the kids at nine years old failing. Not only that, but they don't even qualify for special education if their IQs are low because they are "performing up to their ability." That is the answer we get. If they simply have a low IQ they are not special ed, they are so-called slow learners and slow learners implies that every child can learn, just more slowly. And as educators we believe that all children can learn, but when you have x amount of information for them to have to know by May 3rd the slow learners are not going to get there by the day of the test and they are going to fail it. So we hand these kids a failure every time they take one of these tests. And that's absolutely wrong. And nobody politically wants to deal with that."

The whole idea of standards for all may in fact push a system to rely more heavily on remedial services rather than less heavily. The state tests push teachers into impasses that do not provide acceptable avenues for meeting the academic and emotional needs of all students. Teachers wonder whether you can promote and accomplish an individualized education for standardized testing? What they see happening instead is that individualized education is being forced into one narrow path; that of special education and so students with needs that could have been adequately met by the classroom teacher must now become 'classified needs' in order to get modifications on the test. Several teachers explain how before having to push students through the same hoops they would challenge students at their levels so they were excited and motivated to learn. But now feel frustrated with how well they can meet the needs of students whose performance levels will only bring the school's scores down. Rumors of trafficking low performing students between schools does not sound too far fetched when the stakes are high.

Furthermore teachers face real dilemmas when their attempts to get Individualized Education Programs for students mean trying to fit a unique individual into a classification system that is facing its own ethical and moral issues. One fourth grade teachers relates how hard it is to get hard-to-classify students the services they need: *"We were told we have too high a percentage of minorities classified. So basically right now if I have a minority in my classroom I need service for, good luck. For example, there's a girl in my classroom and our psychologist came in and said to me, 'Is she functionally retarded?' You know she tests just above the retarded area. 'Well what do you mean functionally retarded?' 'As in can't tie shoes, can't perform the daily functions.' I say no. And he looks at me and says, 'If she's not functionally retarded I am not going to be able to get her services.' What are we doing here? You mean she has to be basically non-existent before I can get her services? He sent the parents to get a neurological exam to try to find some type of classification, any type of classification to get the girl services. And this is ridiculous. She's in fourth grade and she cannot comprehend. I've got her reading fluency up but she comprehends very little. She cannot process information. And before I can get her services you've got to jump through hoops for days and days and days and days, and at the same time the state standards are holding her just as accountable as anybody else in the room."*

The teachers feel that the state has put them into a no-win situation when it comes to students with disabilities. As this teacher describes: *"One of the problems with special*

education is something that again we have no control over at the building level. The state sets us up at cross-purpose and this is something that evokes huge frustration. On one hand you have the IEP which might say things like: 'The student will identify the P sound at the beginning of the word.' And that same student has to take the ELA. Now somebody is not talking to somebody. And we look at the special education teachers and they've got these first grade packets where they are teaching the P sound at the beginning of a word and I'm trying to teach the kid to read a 6 page essay and do inferential thinking. Now what is wrong here? And that's the state setting us up with no answers. Nobody wants to even go near that. But it is one of the frustrations that we live with constantly in the classroom."

Additionally of concern is what teachers are saying about their student population in general. Most of the teachers at Hemlock describe their students as delayed, not deficient, delayed. In their experience, these students are functioning developmentally behind other students of a similar age. This means that while other students enter kindergarten having been exposed to a variety of literacy-based materials, these students may not have these experiences until they are in school. They are not incapable of learning their alphabet or numbers, just behind. If this is the case what happens to students who continuously fail on benchmark and state tests? What are the consequences of penalizing children further because their parents didn't interact with them in ways that prepared them for the culture of school? And if a system can show that most students in an area are performing on average a year behind, what would be the issue for the state if these students were to take the test in fifth grade as opposed to fourth?

(4) The scoring process may add to that discrimination

Finally when the tests are done and out of the teachers' hands, there is the issue of scoring.

T: "*What is our purpose for writing for this test*?"
S: "*To pass 4th grade*."
S: "*To get a good score*."
T: "*Yes, to get the best score you are capable of getting*."
S: "*Mine is 4*."
T: "*Which are all 4's, yes. You need to prove to the people who are scoring the test that you understood what you are reading. It's not enough to do it in your brain. You need to write it out. You need to find the textual evidence. You need to find the details. What trainers? What examples? The main problem is you get lazy. You answer only half of the question. You don't bother to put enough details or don't bother to put beginning or ending sentences*."
S: "*If a machine is grading the ELA then how can they tell if you have the details*?"
T: "*A machine doesn't grade all of it. Teachers grade this part and you know what teachers look for*!"
S: "*That's for sure*!"

The issue of scoring is not as straightforward as this, however. While

many teachers have commented that in practice they feel the objectivity of the scoring process is questionable, in theory they feel the criteria by which the scoring should be done is fair. Not only have most of the teachers at Hemlock participated in test scoring, most use a similar rubric to score the students' practice tests as well. One of the 4th grade teachers who has attended several scoring workshops relates how they always begin with arguments over what the criteria mean and look like in practice. Similarly, she laughs as she recalls the many arguments she and her colleagues have about scoring and grading. She believes that the standards set at Hemlock are higher than the state's scoring guides. For example, they teach their students to write a main idea + 3 details whereas the scorers only expect one detail. She thinks, however, that the state's scoring criteria are generous and having a separate score for content and mechanics is fair. She says that the process really allows you to differentiate between content and mechanics so you can end up being pretty generous with the content.

Several teachers, however, share stories of the kind of subjective judgments they feel affect teachers scoring the tests:

"*The way things were being scored by teachers is really your judgment of what you feel the kid did. You have the rubric but you don't really use the rubric. There were teachers, 'well he tried, you know, give him a good grade because I know he tried harder than you know,' and other teachers were 'this is awful.' It's the opinions of teachers that score the test too. If the teacher is a hard grader or wants everything perfect obviously the kid is going to get a low grade. And if a teacher thinks the effort is there and they can tell that they tried to do it then they are more generous. I was surprised with just how judgmental a teacher could be and that could determine a lot. And they're very judgmental on the schools too. Because the schools are written up on the back of each test so 'oh a kid's from this school so obviously the kid's not going to do well' or 'this kid will do wonderful because they're from so and so.' People will flip [the test] over and see [her district] and they'll automatically think it's a low score, so they're not going to think high expectations.*"

"Each individual, even though they were given a rubric, it's very subjective. If there was any doubt in your mind you had to go and have a facilitator look at it and they had to make a judgment call based on what they thought and then you had to come to a meeting of the minds. Because if you don't agree then it has to go to a third person. And you know they were minor points, because points I would argue, maybe I was being a little too critical and they were a little more lenient, but they had gone through more extensive training, so back and forth saying 'well ok, I could see your point but this is my point,' and trying to meet half way. That was the most frustrating part because even when we were doing the practice tests there were times when people at our table were far off as far as what they thought it should be graded. So looking at it from district to district, the expectations by individual teachers is definitely going to be a factor."

"There was a lot of mention in the training on trying not to make subjective judgments about the students based on where, what district or what school or gender, and to eliminate any kind of conversation at the tables regarding where the kids are from.

Let's be honest, you can tell right away, you can almost judge generally a kid's school level based on the language they are using, the word ability. So we really wanted to eliminate that, because teachers are fearful that some kids get the benefit of the doubt, they might have left out a minor detail or something but they'll still get a four whereas some kid from another school may have left out the same detail but by virtue of the type of wording they use and their grammar, syntax, or whatever, they don't get the same benefit of the doubt. So there are a lot of issues that come into [play]. It's a very sensitive area this whole standardized testing."

(5) It narrows what is taught and how the material is actually learned

Many teachers struggle with how the test forces them to instruct in ways in which they disagree. Beyond the program put together at Hemlock there are issues with the testing itself. Teachers acknowledge the fact that they need to somehow be able to measure how students read and comprehend but feel torn with how they are being asked to do so in a standardized way feeling that this does not acknowledge that students may have different approaches to interpreting texts or learning information. Instead, the standardized format forces teachers to ignore individual strengths and needs in an attempt to get all children to be able to tackle the same test at the same time. A fourth grade teacher explains her frustration: *"There are deep contradictions in the messages we are getting. Every kid is supposed to have and indeed we are supposed to encourage them to build on their individualized learning styles. The district actively supports individualized educational programs for children and then we are supposed to cram them through the test using the same approach for all the children. Give me a break!"*

The tests often force teachers to choose between providing a firm foundation in a subject and striving to meet the goals emphasized on the test. Needing to teach to the test while also making sure students have mastered the basic skills in all subject matters is seen as unrealistic to many teachers, as this teacher explains: *"Having all the tests in fourth grade is unrealistic. The math test focuses extensively on problem solving which is fine, but so many students haven't mastered the lower levels. We can't do a good job for these students if we need to push them through higher-order thinking skills at the expense of making sure they have the necessary basic math skills."*

Other teachers express feeling pressured to give up the extra, experiential or extension activities, those they feel their students desperately need because that's where the language and thinking is developed. In fact the relationship between the core curriculum, what is taught for the test, and what are considered extra activities are being shaped by what is expected on the test more and more. Paying attention to the whole child means paying attention to the psychosocial and emotional health of the child and that is not happening as it should under the current system.

Teaching amidst all the testing requirements means that teachers need to make conscious decisions about every activity they do, even the so-called 'extra' activities. Slowing down to enjoy an activity for its own sake and not to lead up to a predetermined goal or objective is becoming more and more difficult for teachers to justify when it

seems that everything needs to be justified for it to occur. One fourth grade teacher explains: *"One of the things that I think is crucial to developing life-long learners is that they learn to love reading and they learn to love learning and it is very hard to maintain that with children who are nine and ten years old when you're pushing them so hard to be constantly perfect and there's always work involved with reading. As a classroom teacher I have to insist regularly that we "waste time" by just plain enjoying literature or taking time to just plain enjoy learning something, just because it feels good and it's fun, not because we have to pass a test in it."* But as a fourth grade teacher she is also very aware of the pressures against doing just this and comments that she shudders to think what is happening in other 4th grade classrooms.

In reference to the district mandated curriculum, another teacher comments on her worries that a curriculum that focuses primarily on only a portion of what children should be experiencing in school may have consequences beyond what students are currently experiencing. She states: *"It will be interesting to see. No program is going to be perfect and by the district saying that this is what you're teaching only, I can tell you right now there are kids who are going to be lost in the gap. They are going to fall through the cracks if we are only doing what we have been told, because it does not meet the needs of every child. And so that's going to become an issue down the line with the testing."* Thinking similar thoughts, another teacher fears that the push to standardize the curriculum may also increase the likelihood that teachers spend less time worrying about the effects of their overall program: *"It's much easier to not do anything if you have a scripted program. Teachers should be constantly agonizing over their curriculum and how their children are doing. But [a standardized program] makes life easier, you open up to page 73, do the page, doesn't matter if they got it, and move on."*

Teachers have mixed feelings about what the tests ask students to do. They acknowledge that the skills learned for the tests are good skills but feel mixed about whether the conformity that they are reinforcing is what they consider to be the goals of the new state standards. Conformity of responses is what is being encouraged both in the test formats and in the instructions from teachers on how to take the test. Several teachers involved in the scoring process share their view of what they see:

"Each teacher corrected on average 60 papers, you had two minutes per paper. It was an all day affair. And after awhile all the papers started to look and sound exactly the same. I mean if we [as a group of teachers] were successful at one thing, we certainly have taught these kids conformity and how to answer a question in a standardized way because they all started to sound, they were somewhat of varying quality, but the content was the same."

"It was very repetitive."

"So we're really teaching, I guess if that's basic literacy skills, underline the word 'basic,' then I think the teachers across the state are doing their job at least."

Parents are also aware of the impact the tests are having on teaching and learning at Hemlock:

"*I've seen the results because my son, in his class, they spend so much time preparing for this test, they have very little free time like they used to have and they're so focused on the test.*"

"*The whole focus this year is passing and doing well on the ELA. And for children who are having a difficult time with learning their daily skills, really it is more of a burden*."

"*I think the standardized testing as far as the way it's impacting the teachers is the least, in talking to my son's teacher, I think she feels her hands are tied. I think she's restricted. It's one thing to have a curriculum and know that that's what has to be taught throughout the whole year, but your hands are tied, you have no freedom in the way you present your materials. Got to make it fit into this test. I think they're thinking so much about the test and not about the materials they're going across. A good example is the reading material. I think you can teach somebody to read just as effectively with one thing, with one book, as you can with what she's got to use. I think that if a teacher has had an education in an area and wants to teach something this way and it's effective, she should be allowed to do that regardless of what the test is going to show. I think the test is restricting their, actually I think it's having a negative effect on what they think, because I think it's all about tunnel vision, and you can see it. Because she's like, I'd like to do this, but we have to spend so much time on this for the test. And I think it's like shooting yourself in the foot. That's really restricting the teachers.*"

(6) It emphasizes a pass/fail mentality

Test makers are quick to point out that the testing system is there to help teachers assess their students' educational needs and to assist schools and districts in their assessment of programmatic and instructional needs. But the consequences for schools who do not meet adequate performance levels paints a picture that does not include benevolence or assistance for teachers and students. The picture painted by those closest to the reality of such a system is far more devastating; one that is filled with embarrassment, fear of punishment, loss of respect and pride. The difference between a 2 and a 3 is huge and opens considerable anxiety and anger among teachers who wonder what this means for students who may never achieve proficiency at least as determined by policy makers? The system leaves no room for teachers to praise the progress made, and as one fourth grade teacher feels, *"telling a kid who has moved from being a non-reader to a 2 that he has failed is an abomination."*

Teachers and parents are left in the dark as to the consequences of these scores in the academic life of the children. One parent asks: *"I don't think parents really understand. I know I myself don't understand. What happens if my child doesn't pass? Does that mean he's not going to continue? Does that mean he's going to be labeled not*

up to par? What does it exactly mean if they don't pass? I don't think that's ever been explained to any parent."

And parents are concerned for how these scores shape their children's self-image and warp their relationship to learning and to their peers. Again what will this mean for children who are unlikely to pass these 4th grade tests? What system is in place to assure these parents that it will not promote long-term devastation for their children? How will educators and policy makers respond to these parents?:

"I think that if the whole fourth grade year is just focused on the passing of the ELA, and in the end the child does not pass, it's going to be very devastating to somebody who is nine-years-old. I mean when you're thirty-two, you realize what a test is and you learn from your mistakes because you have the maturity level. When you're nine and that's what your whole year was based upon, and then you're not going to pass, it's got to be very devastating to be nine. And I try to reassure my child that a test cannot tell people what kind of a person you are, but the basis of the whole year is testing and them passing or failing."

"It's very hard, they need to pass, and my kids won't be. And that really has me worried and concerned."

"*And they find out about it. It's not a secret*."

"*The kids talk amongst each other. I mean, my daughter took it last year, and as much as you don't want competition between kids, my daughter fortunately got a higher score, but it's like you did better than me, and what are your numbers? And it's impacting me because my son, he's in third, and they do ELA, he calls it ELA, and they have a teacher come in and they talk about it one or two hours a day, preparing them for next year. But I know when he takes that test he's not going to get anywhere near my daughter, and once again he's going to feel he's not up to par*."

"*What we really need to do with this education thing is they've got to de-emphasize this test. It's better than not having a test. I think that every grade should be tested just because you know where your progress is, but the emphasis has got to be taken off of it so that it's not the all-important, everything and everything on one test. You shouldn't even know when the test is going to be given. There should be no preparation for the test. I mean as far as I'm concerned, a true test of your knowledge is when you are like in a class and the teacher gives you a pop quiz. You have to have some testing, but I don't think it should be something you're cramming for and preparing for. It's like trying to study for an IQ test*."

Teachers are not immune to these feelings and struggle daily between needing to push the children to pass and worrying about the consequences of these actions. For most teachers the idea that all children should be at the same level at the same time flies against everything they have been taught about child development and learning. Several

teachers comment: *"We were always taught in school it doesn't matter where they should be, we have to deal with them where they are."*

"It really doesn't take into account, well you might have some children that have made great gains, they may not test well, and by putting so much focus on the test are we really doing the school a service and the district a service as a whole? Because that's only one aspect of our children, and it does not give an accurate picture of the entire learning environment."

"It really makes me angry when I or my children are dishonored because of this thing. It doesn't show how far my kids have come."

What happened to the idea of intrinsic rewards? Students are drilled over and over about the basic strategies of deciphering what the test is asking and which type of answer best suits that question. But the reward, the score is outside of them. A line has been drawn about what is good and what is bad. It doesn't matter how much they've achieved, how much they've learned in any given period of time. For a student there are many developments that occur in a year. To take a student at one point and give him or her an arbitrary score undermines the respect we have for who they are.

I looked over some of the essays written in this year's ELA. Some of them were long, some were short. Some showed clear textual evidence and answered the question. Others showed struggling writing skills and phonetic spelling. But I was struck by one essay written by a Hispanic boy. While his writing mechanics weren't strong and his sentences lacked detail, he clearly had a topic sentence, three sentences with the word change in each one of them (taken from the question), and an ending sentence. On the opposite page was a clear outline represented by four labeled rectangles: topic sentence, beginning detail, ending detail, and closing sentence. If he only gets a 2, will someone point out to him how proud they are that he remembered to use the model?

Pressure

> "*I think the message from administration is very clearly that they have to do well. This test is very important and you have to do well. I think the districts get it from the state. I think it comes right from the top. The state education puts the pressure on the schools, the school puts pressure on the teachers, teachers put pressure on the kids which in turn puts pressure on parents. I think it's a downward slope."* (Hemlock parent)

I was told when I entered Hemlock that I would see good teaching and I would see bad teaching, but I would definitely see pressure. Through the year, as I observed the daily activities of teachers and students and engaged with teachers and staff in many conversations, I have kept open this concept of pressure. If indeed present, how would it manifest itself? What follows are just some of the ways that pressure has manifested itself and shapes, interferes, limits or transforms the daily work and lives of teachers, students, and parents.

(1) Pressure is trying to comply to a mandated program while being unsure what exactly that means

A routine, although not frequent, occurrence is when someone from the district office, like the deputy superintendent visits the school. Beyond the fact that the teachers are unsure about the 'real' purpose of these visits, is the uncertainty around what it is she really wants to see. A teacher explains that the teachers are not uptight because they are not complying with district requirements or because they are not doing their job in a satisfactory way. Rather, the general tension is explained well by one primary level teacher: *"As a personality type teachers are pretty compliant. If we're told to do something, we may grumble or complain, but by and large we all do it. But I think that when people do come and visit, I'm under the impression that there's some doubt as to whether we're always on board with whatever the latest theory or materials or technique is from the state or the administration's point of view. And you get e-mails frequently [from the district offices] about are you doing this? Or using this? Or we've been visiting buildings and we haven't seen any of this? So you're always worried if you've got the right stuff hanging on the wall, or are you playing the right games, or doing the right activity if a visitor should come by."*

The teachers are concerned because the math and reading series come with a wide variety of games and activities and while it would be impossible for them to do them all, they feel a lack of guidance as to what content, skills or activities might be considered priorities by the district. As one teacher explains: *"Technically they don't tell you you can drop this, you can drop that. And I'm not sure it's been clearly said that it's up to your prerogative, you know, they said we can supplement, but how do you interpret that?"* Not knowing in what ways they may be allowed to vary the core curriculum leaves the teachers uneasy and unprepared.

As it turns out, during her latest visit, the deputy superintendent gives them a glowing appraisal. And much to the teachers' disappointment she focuses more on building safety issues like whether harassment awareness flyers are clearly posted and the glass in all doors kept uncovered than on the work they have openly displayed throughout the hallways and classrooms.

(2) Pressure is being required to teach and to test students on a curriculum that is over your students' maturity or ability level

The teachers all agree that it is not appropriate to use and test students on material that is written at a level that is above the comprehension, reading, and ability level of most students in whatever grade level it is targeting. This is especially true they feel if the assessments, in this case the benchmark tests given at the end of each math and reading unit, cannot be modified to meet the level of instruction received by the students. A couple of teachers talk about the result of this approach:

"[The district] wants to make sure that everyone is exposed to the same material. I think it's putting too much emphasis on testing. Because when you've got children that aren't reading or are really struggling and you're pushing these concepts that are either above their heads or they're not grasping and are developmentally inappropriate just to get them ready so that when they do reach 4th grade they can pass the test you've lost sight of education. We need to take these children from where they are and move them forward."

"So the kids are constantly frustrated, constantly failing. Now the answer to that are the leveled readers [which are little booklets that are leveled either one or two years below grade level as far as difficulty]. But it's not a very good answer because we're still expecting these kids to take the same unit tests as the other ones, and they still fail them. As a matter of fact even the so-called 'high' half of my class can't read independently in the basal."

Furthermore, the math curriculum works on the assumption that the students will be involved with the same program over an extended period of time so that in time they will understand and master the program. Not reaching mastery, however, has the effect of frustrating the students in ways that seem to work against mastery. One teacher explains:

"The [math] program is a spiral program. Its overriding philosophy is that you introduce a skill, you hit it and then you move on. You never teach to mastery because the same skill is hit again later on in the year and then in the next grade and by the third or fourth time the kid hits that skill, they're supposed to get it. The program also spends a lot of extra time and this is something that most of us agree with, spends more time than most math programs working on real life math problems. They are very, very good at that. However, they never stick with anything long enough so that any of the kids get mastery on any skill. So you have kids constantly frustrated, failing the unit tests, and you're just supposed to move on, and it's not appropriate."

What happens is that instead of helping teachers assess their students' needs and strengths, these tests become daily reminders to the students that they are somehow less capable, less able than other students; students who more closely match the specific grade levels determined by these tests and standards. Teachers assess their students with a variety of measures. It becomes a problem for teachers and for students when the primary measures used to assess students fail to provide useful information, as one teacher explains: *"I give the [benchmark] tests because I have to. But when I look at what a child is doing I use the assessments I was taught to use: a running record, informal assessments, what the child is actually reading, how are they decoding, when they miscue what are they miscuing with? Is it semantic, is it syntax, is it phonics? You know, I don't use the benchmark tests from the series because that doesn't tell you. That just tells you if they're failing or not and you generally know if they are at grade level or not."*

(3) Pressure is being required to teach the curriculum in ways that go against what you have been taught works best for your students

One of the hardest adjustments for the teachers to make this year is having to rethink reading and ELA instruction without a pull-out program. Up until this year, the common practice was for teachers to group students by reading level, sometimes combining several classrooms together, to maximize grouping, teacher and space resource. This year all reading and ELA instruction have had to occur in the classroom so that reading or ELA time often involves a classroom teacher, one or two reading teachers, and an aide or two working together with anywhere between twenty-two and thirty students depending on the classroom. One teacher questions this decision: *"Why aren't we allowed to group in ways that work for our children? Small group instruction obviously works better but unfortunately you can't have three teachers teaching in the same room at the same time. It sounds nice but I know I'm distracted by the teachers, and I'm not a seven or eight year old, so if I'm distracted then they're distracted. And it's very stifling. If you're reading a story with the children you want to make it animated and fun and if we're being animated and silly over here, the other group is watching us. They just can't help it. I mean that's just the way of human nature so we have to be very subdued and you change the way you teach a lot of things and it's less exciting because you have a totally different lesson going on in the same space. Whereas if one of us could just go to a different location like we had been doing in the past, then you have one group, it's more focused, it's more intense, and it seems to work."*

A primary teacher feels that rather than benefiting the students at each level and contributing to collaboration between classrooms and teachers, this approach diminishes her ability to meet the individual needs of her students, especially those who are ahead and those who are behind. She explains: *"And we have children, like I have one who's reading on a third grade level and I know (other primary grade teachers) have one who's reading higher and you group them in your classroom as best as you can but you're not meeting the child's needs the best way you can 100% of the time because they're reading so much above everybody else, and then you might have one or two that are still so far below not even at kindergarten level, it really makes it difficult. Whereas if you could cross-group it would make it a little easier because we could make a group of three or four children reading way above grade level or the ones that really need that extra remediation."*

Many teachers have argued that especially for students who come from such a variety of family situations, small groups provide a sense of security and an emotional closeness that is often lacking in their home lives. As one teacher explains: *"When you have a small group, the kids know you, you know them, you can be much more personal with them, you can be much more relaxed with them. You can't do that when you have 25, 26 kids all on different reading levels. And that's another sad thing about what we're doing, these kids need small groups to learn, they need small groups to get more individual attention from the teacher. And they need to form a relationship with the teacher, which encourages them to try harder and to go one step more. You can't do that in a large class. Even the high schools are realizing that, they are dividing their high*

schools into houses. Why would it be any different at the elementary level? In fact it would be even worse because the kids are even younger. They need a parental figure."

(4) Pressure is feeling forced to view teaching as an instrumental, technical endeavor that excludes the psychosocial relationships formed between students and teachers and students and students

The teachers at every grade level but especially at the fourth grade level are concerned that the increased standardization, pacing of delivery, and emphasis on testing will cause permanent and long-lasting damage in other important areas such as the students' attitudes toward learning and senses of selves. Teachers have always understood their role to encompass much more than the content of a curriculum. They feel, however, that the current pressures placed on them to follow a prescribed curriculum and increase scores on state tests works against their abilities to meet the whole needs of their students. As these teachers comment:

"I resent, I resent what I perceive as the politicians and the powers that be like the regents. I resent the strain that they've put on me, cause I still feel it's important to take care of children, because that is what we do. We don't just teach; we take care of children. And that is a huge part of what we do. And they seem to have devalued that completely."

"That's the last thing on their minds."

"And we don't stop doing it. But what we do is work four times as hard and take on four times more stress because of it. It's a huge problem that we are not, that it seems that the political whims don't pay attention to the whole child."

The teachers explain that there is less time for student sharing, less time for conversation on topics that matter to students, less time to follow teachable moments if a student brought in an interesting pet, or a parent offered to explore a skill or hobby with the classroom. But more importantly, the teachers worry that these activities are not simply extras that might enhance a student's experience with the core material, but are the very foundations the students need to do well with the core curricular material to begin with. As these teachers explain:

"They're rushed, they are very rushed, so there's less thought-time for the children. If they're writing something, it's hurry up and get it down, hurry up and get it down. There's no let's think about it, jot down some ideas. You have to really move quickly because you have more to fit into your day. So I feel like we've given up that luxury."

"*Everything we do is important. There's a lot of stress not being able to let the students spend time on necessary skills. Our kids are missing a lot of Piaget stuff, things like water pouring or block play. They lack kinesthetic experiences with blocks or Legos. You can't teach them that. They need hands-on. There is no time for letting kids explore*

manipulatives to give them those experiences. We don't have time with such a packed curriculum to play with materials, to let students experience learning by doing."

This teacher explains how reading is supposed to include a varied and rounded approach to literacy but most of the time the sheer volume of the basal actually limits the variety of the lessons: "*I would like to spend at least 20 minutes a day engaged in sustained silent reading to enjoy reading and not to answer questions. We only read like that once every two weeks and that is a sin against literacy. And I think that's the kind of experience that develops long-term literacy.*" And as if to accentuate her point she practically drops a huge reading basal in my hand and snorts disdainfully at its sheer enormity. "*It leaves no time for poetry, journaling, and anything creative*," she explains. "*Madeline Hunter would be happy to see so much 'time on tasks.' You could spend 3 to 4 hours a day on each lesson if you were to cover all the activities and games that are included. The problem is we are expected to cover ALL of it, and since we can't, we are always in a state of guilt, a feeling of covering up for something we couldn't have done well in the first place.*"

Having to focus on the tests devalues the important role teachers play in the lives of families. A role that is often lost in the school report cards, but is pointed out by one second grade teacher :*"We take a lot of pride in our kids and in our efforts to support families. Today, for example, I hooked a family up with several resources. This is a family in crisis and I was able to help. This is an important function of a teacher."*

(5) Pressure is having to struggle to prioritize when the choices are often between a rock and a hard place

Fourth grade teachers are especially put to the test to assess the needs of their students and take risks to meet those needs. This is because with four standardized tests to prepare their students for, as well as cover the fourth grade curriculum in four core curricular areas, decisions for time allocation on particular tasks need to be negotiated daily.

The tests put pressure on the teachers to standardize their judgment of what is good instruction, or what are necessary skills to teach students. Research is showing that teachers are more and more apt to teach a skill that correlates with what is needed for the test, as for example when one teacher states that even if it is in the curriculum, teaching paragraphs is not an essential skill for a student to learn because it is not on the ELA. Other teachers strongly disagree and feel that there are important skills that should be taught before 4th grade regardless of what is asked on the ELA. As for example this teacher explains: *"I personally think that organizing your thoughts is a main, basic skill that kids need to learn. And one of the ways we organize our thoughts is in paragraphs. So I feel it's been an extremely important skill, whether or not the ELA tests it, I teach it. And I think it should be taught. And I think that a kid coming into fourth grade should know what a topic sentence is and three details that support that topic sentence. Because that is the kind of critical thinking that our kids don't get at home. Our kids are not*

taught critical thinking. And we're the ones who have to teach them that critical thinking skill. And if it doesn't start till fourth grade, then they are lost."

The issue is not whether one teacher is right or wrong, but how the tests put pressure on teachers to rethink what is important for students to learn. Teachers have to constantly evaluate the worth of what is being taught both in light of the state tests but also in light of their own principles of teaching and learning.

Sometimes it is the curriculum that is not preparing the kids properly either for the test or to master a subject matter. So instead of keeping up with the lockstep curriculum, teachers might make an educated judgment and veer off course for awhile. As this teacher felt she had to do in order for her students to master a particular math concept:

In math, students are grouped across fourth grade classes with different teachers in different ability groups. Today there are six students working in a group with this teacher, while 7 other students are working independently on math packets or math programs on the computer. The teacher reminds the six students working with her that their homework was on partial products.
T: *"What does partial mean?"*
S: *"Part."*
T: *"Part, you do one part at a time. Tell me what the two parts are?"* (They are working on the multiplication problem 87 x 3).
S: *"3 x 80"*
T: *"and"*
S: *"3 x 7"*
T: *"Why didn't you say 3 x 70?"*
S: *"Because it's in the ones."*
T: *"Right, it's not in the tens, it's in the ones."*
They work on it together on the black board. The teacher then looks over the students' shoulders to see who got it.
T: *"Did you get it right, (O)? No. Let's see what you did wrong* (She looks over her shoulder – it's an alignment problem. She helps her fix it.)

They move on to the next problem which is to multiply 183 x 5.
T: *"We've added another part. Who wants to tell me what parts there are?* (All hands shoot up. She asks a student to pick someone. He does.)
S: *"100, 80, and 3."*
T: *"What do I do with the 100, 80, and 3?"*
S: *"You multiply each by 5."*
T: *"Right, you multiply each by 5. Which one do you want to start with?"*
S: *"5 x 80."*
T: *"I was hoping you would pick 5 x 80, because I want to prove to you that it comes out the same as long as you do each part."*

They work out the three parts: 80 x 5 = 400, 100 x 5 = 500, 3 x 5 = 15, so 183 x 5 = 915. Then work on several more problems, each time adding extra parts. The students are following intently. They are eager and engaged and all seem to be on the same page making fewer mistakes as they go along. They move along to double digits: 46 x 32.

T: *"What are the parts?"*
S: *"2 x 40, 2 x 6, 30 x 40, 30 x 6."*
T: *"Alright you got it, that's the point."*

They work on several of these and then the teacher has each student in turn create a 2 digit by 2 digit problem to do for their homework.

The teacher explains why she felt the need to spend considerable more time on this one concept than is allotted in the math series, Everyday Math: *"With this small group I am absolutely breaking the rules of Everyday Math. All of them failed the multiplication test. They didn't know how to do the partial products algorithm period. They felt stupid, they felt incompetent, and they failed it miserably because their brains couldn't process all those steps at one time. So I've gone back now. I've spent two class days teaching them, doing a task analysis first, which comes pretty naturally after you've taught for awhile like the multiplication algorithms. You saw how carefully I added each step. If you skip one of those steps kids like this will not be able to make that mental jump, they can't do it, you have to go in a methodical way, they have to master each step, and then they feel good about themselves. They were begging me for harder problems. They get turned on by that. They love it. Now they're going to go home, they are going to do this homework that they made up and they are all going to know how to do partial products algorithms, which I guarantee will be on the test. Not partial products but multiplication problems, they don't care what algorithm they use, but it will be on the test."*

Similarly, another teacher explains that since the social studies series is way over the students' heads, she spends a considerable amount of time picking apart each paragraph and explaining the content and words to them. She explains: *"We're way behind in social studies. I have mounds of newspapers around here. And the new social studies series is way above their reading level. They cannot read it independently whatsoever. So you have to stop and break down every paragraph with them. There's nothing that goes with the newspapers. I have to do all that myself. There's some suggested activities, but no standardized questions to help the kids prepare for the test, most of it you develop on your own."*

Furthermore, the students don't just retain the material on the first reading. Because units tend to build on the information learned in previous units, this teacher also feels that it is important to introduce a new chapter or unit especially in a subject like social studies by reviewing the important ideas in the last lesson. What follows is a fast-paced interaction between this teacher and her students replaying what was learned previously in social studies as an introduction to this particular day's lesson.

T: *"New York goes to war. At the top, page 1, New York is going to war. Somebody tell me what was the confusing part about the title of what we read yesterday, The French and Indian War? Why is that name confusing, it's misleading, what did we talk about last time?"*
S: *"That the French doesn't fight the Indians, that the French is with the Indians."*

T: *"Yea, the French and the Indians teamed up. What was the name of the guy who teamed with the Indians?"*
S: *"Champlain."*
T: *"Oh, Mr. Champlain. Mr. Champlain teamed up with them and now they are going to attack the English. Explain why he wanted to attack the English?"*
S: *"Because he made a deal that he wanted to help them explore. They said if you help me fight, the Iroquois, they would help them explore."*
T: *"Why would the French want to go to war with the English?"*
S: *"They want to fight cause the English colonies have something that the French want."*
T: *"What do the English have that the French don't have?"*
S: *"They have fur."*
T: *"You're cheating, you're reading, think on your own. What do the English have that the French don't have?"*
S: *"The fur trade."*
T: *"What about the fur trade? Freeze. We have to look at the bigger picture. We need a French king and an English king."* (She selects different children to play the kings and other roles. The students stand up on their chairs). *"Didn't I tell you that everything in history boils down to power and…"*
S: *"… money"* (several students at once)
T (asking English king): *"Why do you love those colonies so much. You passed the navigation act."*
S: *"The fur trades."*
T: *"Yes. King of England, you really love your fur trades. Now we need some French troops in Canada"* (she picks a student). *"You are a French troop. Why do you think your king has asked you to go to war?"*
S: *"Probably trying to get more money from the colonies because they are only able to trade with him [the king of England] because of the navigation law."*
T: *"You want to take over the trade. I want somebody to tell me in their own words what's the story behind the French and Indian war."*
S: *"That the French are helping the Indians."*
T: *"That's the first part. We just played out the second part* (repeats question)."
S: *"They are trying to take over their right for the fur trade so they could take the money."*
T (Asks first student): *"What do the French want to take over?"*
S: *"The navigation act."*
T: *"Now that we understand what happened let's find out what happens next."*

The consequence of both these examples is that the teachers at Hemlock continuously struggle with the fear of falling behind in a system that frowns on those who do. So instead of comfortably working with what their students need to better understand the material, they push ahead until it is obvious that pushing ahead is causing their students to fall further behind. The system or curricular calendar itself never stops to allow for make-up time and so the pressure to catch-up in one area may mean covering another superficially or not at all.

(6) Pressure is fitting in review because you know the students need to understand this for the test while also teaching them the 4th grade curriculum

Fourth grade teachers are responsible for providing instruction that will lead to their students passing the 4th grade English Language Art's test, the 4th grade math test, the 4th grade science test, and the 5th grade social studies test which is largely based on the 4th grade social studies curriculum. The ability to retain what has been learned in previous years is of serious concern to 4th grade teachers. This is especially noticeable with the vocabulary words that are needed in each subject matter and with particular skills that teachers are finding they can't take for granted that their students will know.

For example while the 4th graders have begun one of the 4th grade STC kits in science 'Floating and Sinking,' the teacher is also reviewing basic concepts learned in one of the 3rd grade STC kits 'Plant Growth.' Not only that, the students are also growing bean plants and conducting experiments with seeds. The teacher explains why she feels the need to do it all: *"We just finished reviewing germination from third grade and the kids had no clue what germination was. They didn't know the word, they didn't know what it was, they didn't know what a seed coat was, and these were all experiments that they did with the kits. They soaked lima bean seeds in third grade, opened it up, looked at the embryo inside, looked at the cotyledons, the whole nine yards. And they get to fourth grade and they look at you like 'what, seed coats, what's a seed coat? Seeds don't have coats, come on.' But it's amazing how little retention there actually is. I don't think they get introduced to enough vocabulary."*

She goes on to explain that one of the reasons teachers feel so threatened about the lack of integration in the new math and reading series is that it impacts students' learning across the subject matters. When subject matters are well integrated, students not only get concepts presented to them and repeated in a variety of forms but they make more active use of the vocabulary that they are expected to know across subject matters. Science or social studies oriented stories expose the knowledge in real-life situations while helping students develop stronger and broader vocabularies.

At least when reviewing benefits the whole classroom, the teachers can feel justified in spending time on these topics. However, when an individual student shows a gap in his or her learning, the challenge and pressure to address his or her needs is considerably more difficult. This is especially made apparent in examples, such as one where a teacher relates to me her frustration when one week before the ELA test, I observe her interaction with a fourth grader who writes an essay in a practice test with no periods, and capitalizing all of the 'I's, even the ones in the middle of words. She tries to prompt the student into understanding the use of a period by having him read it out loud and adding one whenever he pauses, but he is obviously struggling with this concept. The teacher is noticeably upset and explains to me that the high mobility makes it hard to diagnose such individual weaknesses consistently. Also, not being able to group students into smaller groups means that it is more likely that such a gap would go unnoticed longer. The teacher is only able to give him a quick lesson before turning her attention back to the whole group.

(7) Pressure is evidenced by the kinds of actions you end up taking to meet the expectations set forth for you

The teachers at Hemlock have shown that they are the kind of people that tend to gather up strength to meet new challenges rather than give up and crumble. This is evident in their proactive and systematic approach to test-item analysis of their students' performance on the state tests, in the way they analyze the textbooks and other curricular material in order to identify and then fill the gaps in the curriculum the students will get prior to whichever state test they are working towards, and in the way they strive to arm their students with the test taking strategies necessary for doing well on the tests. In fact it is because these teachers feel capable of preparing their students and providing them with successful test taking strategies that they feel most oppressed when the route to success is being barred from them, as for example when the district has moved to a push-in model for reading and English language arts while also expecting test scores to continue to rise. In cases like these, the teachers find themselves in the extremely stressful position of needing both to comply with district policies while also needing to prepare a new group of students to take the test and do better than last year's group.

Not being able to pull-out and group the students by ability really took its toll on the 4th grade and reading teachers. One teacher comments: *"It's simply stupid not to have been able to group. We've wasted so much time and the students aren't prepared."* Two weeks before the ELA test, these teachers give up on being able to teach to the whole group effectively and break into small groups, focusing their efforts in a final attempt to increase the chances that the students who are capable of passing will. This final effort is described by one of the reading teachers: *"As we got closer it was very apparent that the students were nowhere near where our 4th graders were last year at the same time, nowhere near. They had less understanding, less comprehension, their writing skills were horrible. And so I would say we all felt, not just me, but the teachers we felt a sense of failure and we were terribly worried that even our better students wouldn't pass. We were terribly worried about that. The difference between a student attaining a two and a three is quite a lot because with a three you have to answer the multiple choice, you have to keep going back to the text and if you're not doing that, you're not going to pass. In terms of writing they were still not answering the question. They were answering something else. They were not providing detail, they were not providing textual evidence and their writing was horrible. We had total incomplete sentences. The sense of failure is that we had not done what we had aimed to do. Well we had taught it but it hadn't been learned. And so in the last three weeks there was this frantic struggle to at least be able to get our better students to pass and that's how I think I would describe it as frantic. That's when we minimized all the group lessons and broke in the classroom into groups because we needed to have the students with the capability of passing work together, they had so much to accomplish that they had not yet accomplished and so we couldn't play games any longer with teaching to the middle."*

Taking away their ability to conduct the ELA program they had designed in the way they would have liked has hurt these teachers deeply regardless of whether the scores will eventually go up or down. For the past two years, the ELA scores became a

measure of their design, their work together, their program's success or failure, and so like athletes who strive to beat their previous score, their investment was intensely personal. They took pride in making sure every student took and completed each test and that the testing conditions were ethical and fair.

Each test is approached seriously and with thoughtful consideration of how to create the best testing environment for their students. In fact, the teachers at Hemlock have worked hard to learn the rules of the game and to educate themselves to succeed at it. This past year, however, took a lot of wind out of their sails and may have pushed them across the threshold of tolerance. What happens to teachers who need to take the fall for their students' performance but have no authority on how to prepare them? What happens to people who strive to analyze what is emphasized on the test only to have that emphasis altered year after year so that they find themselves unable to truly reassure their students or prepare them openly and honestly? What frustrates teachers is the way the testing system treats them, excluding them from the decision-making process of what is being measured, how what is being measured is scored, and what is in fact reasonable to ask of fourth graders, keeping them in the dark about information that they can use to improve their teaching *of the* test to their students.

It seems no wonder that teachers might start considering alternative ways to get the information they need. For example, during a workshop offered by the district as part of their participation in the NSF funded research initiative "Assessment in the Service of Science," teachers are asked to analyze student trends in responses on last year's science test to identify the strengths and weaknesses in their instructional program. The idea is to look for trends in the way students addressed key ideas or areas of the standards to identify specific gaps in their instructional program and fill them. But while the teachers understand and participate in this process they also feel that without the particular questions that stumped the children it is impossible to determine whether it is really a problem of content. As one teacher asked: *"How can we determine if the problem is a reading difficulty rather than science content or skills difficulty?"* To which another one responded: *"What we'll have to do is sit there and copy all the questions."*

(8) Pressure gets transferred to others and interferes with the maintenance of healthy relationships especially between adults and children

Pressure is evidenced in how the teachers push young children through fast-paced lessons, shifting from English language arts, to math, to reading without a break. Pressure is also evidenced by the amount of teacher-directed teaching that is going on. That pressure is magnified when you have 4 teachers working the same group of students, all continuously stressing to 'think' and 'use your brains' when thinking and using your brain may not mean the same thing at all to a nine-year-old.

One of the reading teachers comment: *"What are these children? Nine years old? We're putting a lot of pressure on nine-year-olds, a lot of pressure on them. The students who are not as capable, behind, whatever you want to call them, become very frustrated because we're asking them for higher level thinking skills when they are still having*

trouble even reading. And that's very frustrating for them and I think that leads to anxiety and acting out and certainly low self-esteem. It can't be anything but for them. I always use sports images, I liken it to taking a beginner down a double diamond trail, after that that person will never ski again and so for the students who are behind this is the problem."

Two days before the ELA, the 4th grade teachers feel their students are about over the edge. One teacher tells me: "*You need to push them enough so they keep going but not too much that they drop.*" She is tired and anxious herself and reminds the reading teachers not to push her students over the edge. The reading teachers are part amused, part outraged that the teacher could think they didn't have the sensitivity to determine that for themselves. They reassure the teacher that they will merely review the format for session 3 feeling that the students don't quite understand what is expected in that section. Together they plan to use the day before the test to *"talk through the format of the test, no pencils. Maybe have a whole class pep talk or therapy session."*

After weeks of intense preparation, one of the teachers watches silently as her group of students finish the second day of the test, close their booklets and play with their pencils for the rest of the test taking time. When the time is up and all the test booklets collected, she tells her students to sit down and listen because she is going to yell at them. And she does: *"I know that was a long test. But I cannot believe, I was ready to rip my face off when I saw you sitting there and staring into space. Don't tell me you couldn't have found one run-on sentence, a spelling mistake, or checking bullets against your answers to make sure you covered everything. Two half an hour sessions is not too much to ask of a 4th grader. We've worked all year on this. You can put 10 minutes more effort. Please tomorrow, don't just sit there. Find something to fix. I saw someone spell first f-r-s-t. If I go to read them and I find that I was wrong, I'll take it all back. But if I find that I am right, I'll be even madder than I am now. Tomorrow you have another writing session. Only tomorrow you will use all your time."*

Pressure is intensified when the effort you put into something gets measured through the performance of others. This simple leap from one individual to another is all that it takes to put holes in a process that despite its flaws should have been enough to accomplish the desired goals. The fact is that while the teachers may drill, push, coax, goad, plead, encourage, support, and pressure, this does not automatically translate into students doing exactly what they are taught to do. The teachers know this and know they need to remind themselves of this:

"I have to come to balance in my own head, about how to keep the kids just as short of being over the line with stress themselves. They are children, they have to play and have fun. They are nine."

"Sometimes you have to remind yourself that they are nine. Step back and say, they're nine."

(9) Pressure is expressed by parents who worry that teachers start doing things in ways that protect their job rather than to meet the educational needs of their children

During a group discussion with parents whose children attend Hemlock, the parents often vacillated between their support of teachers and their need to protect their children from the consequences of too much pressure on the teachers:

"*It's a lot of pressure on the teachers*."

"*They feel it's their responsibility to get those kids to pass. And I think they feel that if the kids don't do fairly well, it's reflecting on how they're teaching. But it's not*."

"I think the teachers take it very much on themselves."

"They do. They take it very personal. It's like their own children, and they want the children to strive. They want the children to be able to pass."

"I don't have a problem with raising standards of our schools. I don't have a problem with that at all. But you get the impression that the teacher is, might be more concerned about what the kids are going to score on the test for their benefit, maybe, than necessarily what the kids are going to be learning."

(10) Pressure is evidenced when schoolwork infiltrates the daily activities of families in ways that add conflict and stress rather than supporting well-being

The parents did not only worry about the pressure their children are experiencing at school, they are also deeply concerned with how the burden of meeting these new expectations have infiltrated their homes. Homework has taken on a whole new shape not only with increased demands for time on task at home, but includes new demands on parents and students for getting it right. This pressure is so intense in some families that one mother described her reaction to a weekend with no homework by stating: *"I felt like dancing in the streets."* Here the parents discuss the pressures placed on them as they do their best to help their children with their homework:

"*The homework is a major issue in our home. We have three children and collectively between them there's probably four hours to do in the course of a night. So on top of a whole day at school and a whole day at work, and a meal to make and baths to give, we have to contend with everything that needs to be done. And when I was in fourth grade the homework was, you answered all the problems whether or not they were right or wrong, you handed it in and you got your credit for turning homework in. Now everything has to be correct or it's graded in that manner because everything is focused the ELA, the sentences, the structure, beginning, middle and end, and the setup of everything. Not that I'm not valuing the basics of an education, but if that godforsaken test was not at the end of this year, my child would be allowed to learn at her pace and not be overwhelmed. The school has always been, since I've had children, our number*

one priority, my husband and I. There's a fine line between a fourth grader getting a half an hour of being read to every night or maybe a half an hour of reading to me. But this just isn't right. We're all going to be in trouble."

"*I noticed the fact that this year, and the year is not halfway over yet, I've been in more conferences with the teacher this year than all of last year already. So I do see, you know, the care that she wants to give. And she's showing me different options that maybe I have to look into. And in that token, I wouldn't say that she's trying to pressure me into making decisions like that, but she's showing me all the options. And I think that's real good*."

"*It's frustrating for parents when your child comes to you and they want you to help them with homework and you don't understand it yourself. Which is how it was when my daughter was in third grade, I didn't understand the new math. I went to the teacher and I said please show me, so I can help her. What they did last year at Hemlock and I believe they're having another one this year, they're having a math night for parents. And they gave us these books, and I use it this year to refer to, to help my son with his new math*."

"*It's really hard because we do the reading thing. I read a page, one reads a page, the other reads a page, we do all that. And it's like OK mom, are we done now? It's like no you guys got to do this. And then it's like screaming because they're screaming at me because they're bored. They don't want to do it. I just can't get my sons to sit down 20 minutes. Not even 20 minutes out of their day can I get them to sit down and say OK you stay here and I'll sit in the middle and we'll just do it all together. And it's like I can just imagine what's going to happen on the test because they're on medication. And I don't feel that I should keep on increasing the medicine because they're not up to par or because they can't stay focused. That's not the answer either to constantly medicate them. So what am I supposed to do? So this test really scares me because my children never failed a grade. My son's spelling has just gone downhill from what it was last year. He's lacking just everything, he really is. And I know that this test documents, is going to be 'mom, because they tell me 2 is failing mom, mom look I got a 2, mom I failed.' 'So, did you do your best?' 'Yup.' 'So, ok then, that's all I want from you is to do your best. But you can tell. It stresses me out because, like I said, I can't get them to sit down for 20 minutes to do their homework. So half of the time their homework is blank because I can't get them to sit down with me*."

And parents wonder if so much homework and such an emphasis on the tests is a good thing. As one parent speculates on what would happen if there were no state standardized tests:

"*I think [without the test] that she could enjoy 4th grade more. She could enjoy being 9 years old. For Thanksgiving, the four-day weekend, the biggest thrill of the whole weekend is not having any homework to do and I felt like dancing in the streets. My daughter she has a difficult time in school, but I think if it wasn't so brow-beaten into them, ELA, ELA, ELA into them, they would be getting a more rounded education this*

year. They would be able to focus on more than one thing than they're doing and you know just absorption of other things and whatever. You learn through comfort, you learn when the pressure is off. It's a lot of pressure for somebody who is nine years old when their biggest thing should be, 'Do I want to read Berenstein Bears tonight or Little House On The Prairie?' It's not that at all. Now it's 'What's Laura Ingalls Wilder trying to say?'"

Arming the Students to Take the Test: For Who and for What Purpose?

I am sitting in a classroom of 2nd graders. They are getting ready to take the Terra Nova's. Over the intercom, the principal provides the daily announcements and the daily problem, this one for 4th graders: *"Mark and David shared a candy bar. Mark ate 1/4 of the bar. David ate 2/4 of the bar. Draw and label a graph of the data. Who ate more?"* To which several 2nd graders cry out, *"David ate more!"*

What does it mean to show knowledge? Will these 2nd graders carry their enthusiasm with them till 4th grade and beyond? What does it mean to teach and learn in a high stakes testing environment? The purpose of this study was not to evaluate whether Hemlock is a good school but to witness one school's response to the state-mandated standards and tests: what is happening, what has happened and what might happen in the future as teachers, parents, and administrators struggle to make sense of what is important in today's educational climate. According to this district's superintendent, when a school is put under review as did occur with another elementary school in the district, the whole system is impacted. The feeling is magnified among teachers and administrators that they do not want that to happen to them, no matter what. Furthermore, the superintendent explains, one result of such a process is that an external value system of what is important and what is not is reinforced. Rather than potentially accentuate other forms of success (i.e., a strong humanity program, a place parents trust, an environment where students feel acknowledged), the punitive process strengthens the value of test scores as the only measure of success. This effect of testing is central to what is happening at Hemlock and cannot be ignored.

Testing: A Vicious Circle

The story of the teachers at Hemlock demonstrates a pernicious side effect of the impact of testing on our most needy students. The farther behind they are to begin with the harsher the reality is for catching up. The teachers at Hemlock have no choice but to drill their students in preparation for the state tests. As a school whose students are performing under the state standards, the consequences of not doing so brings forth widespread fear. Furthermore, these teachers have no alternative ammunition with which to fight against the intrusion of the state. Unlike more affluent schools who may be able to provide their communities with alternative proof of their continued academic growth and success (i.e., creative literacy products, science fairs, percent of students graduating from high school or going to college), the teachers at Hemlock know of no other measurable means to prove that they are educating these children as well as they can.

The story of the teachers and students at Hemlock cannot be understood or considered without addressing the context within which the testing takes place. If content knowledge and hard work was really all it took to carry students to success, Hemlock would never have been unsuccessful. Nor is it the students themselves being less able or the families being less caring. All these reasons for why students don't succeed in school are superficial excuses for why a large portion of urban children aren't able to perform on state tests at the same level as their suburban counterparts.

High mobility, high absenteeism, families with multiple levels of economic and social distress, all place stress on children being able to perform on the state tests at the same level in the same time frame as other children. It is not that these children can't learn. It is simply that these children show a higher variety of needs that need to be addressed in school and are given no extra time to do so. Teachers are left with the choice to either address the multiple developmental, social, educational, and psychological needs of the whole child or teach the skills necessary for passing the state tests. Making the test scores the measure by which a school gets taken over by the state and placed under review leaves the teachers with no other choice but to prioritize test skills over the whole needs of their students. Since teachers cannot prove their competency through other measures, (i.e., the amount of time spent meeting with parents, demonstrations of individualized educational programs to meet the individual needs of their students, knowledge of child development or the fourth grade curriculum), it is to the test scores that the teachers feel they must turn to prove their success. The scores provide something tangible, comparable, and valuable these teachers feel they can offer the children. But this only works if the children pass. For those who don't, the consequences are uncertain for both the students and the teachers.

It is the end of June. The children have gone home for the summer. I sit in an empty classroom with several of the fourth grade teachers reviewing the events of this year as they clean out cupboards, sort paper piles, and prepare for next year. While they plan excitedly for their summer activities and look ahead hopefully to next year, there is a false sense of peace hovering over their heads. It is ironic that while so much of these teachers' lives are controlled and determined by the presence and intensity of the state tests, they must leave each year uninformed and unknowing. As one teacher relates: *"The state makes such a big issue over these tests and then we can't even get the scores. It's insulting and it also hampers our ability to do our jobs. We should already have in place plans for next year. And we can't unless we have the data."* Finally, what message is provided to students who have been tutored, pressured, and constantly reminded that doing well on the state tests is important when they must leave the school year without any reassurance that they have passed? In a system that emphasizes assessments as the key to curricular reform, one can only wonder what these students are really learning about schooling and learning itself through their experiences with state-developed assessments.