ABSTRACT

TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF THE OHIO GRADUATION TEST

By Paul N. Yeckel, III

As a result of enhanced accountability initiatives from legislation such as *The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, there is an increased need for teachers to learn effective practices. This paper discusses survey results from three groups of Southwest Ohio high school teachers to determine their current preparation and motivational techniques and professional opinions regarding the Ohio Graduation Test, a benchmark for determining a school district’s academic rating. Groups were assigned participants based on their school district’s performance as rated by the Ohio Department of Education. Results indicated differing opinions as to what techniques are effective in preparing and motivating students in each of the three groups. A discussion of what these results suggest in terms of improving or maintaining academic achievement is included. Proposals for future study are presented.
TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF THE OHIO GRADUATION TEST

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Introduction

Evolution of Standardized Testing

Kirst (1994) reported that American education has undergone a transformation from a locally controlled system to a system that is primarily driven by state curriculums with federal support in order to ensure that students are being properly educated. Programs of formal testing allow for the state to control the activities for which they are providing funding (Natriello and Pallas, 1998). Natriello and Pallas (1998) reported that standardized testing can be interpreted as causing students to pay greater attention to the demands of the education system and for teachers to devote greater effort in meeting those demands. The development of the current examinations that require students to pass a series of tests in order to receive their high school diploma have evolved through a series of phases throughout the past fifty years (Linn, 2000). These phases have gone from the process of tracking and selection of students in the 1950’s to the standards based accountability systems of the 1990’s. (Linn, 2000). Although Natriello and Pallas (1998) have suggested that these standardized tests may have inequalities in terms of outcomes along racial, ethnic, and social class lines, Linn (2000) argues that these tests are popular and convenient as they are inexpensive, the results are easily visible, and testing can be implemented very rapidly, often during the term of office of the officials that are advocating the change. Kucerick (2002) reported that there are a number of policy debates currently taking place after the passage of the No Child Left Behind act of 2001. While proponents of standardized testing believe that it will highlight accountability defects, detractors believe that the quality of education will suffer because elements of creative thinking are not adequately assessed on standardized tests (Kucerick, 2002). Kucerick (2002) concludes that it is important for teachers to design instruments that carefully measure skills but also challenges a student’s creativity.

Standardized Testing in Ohio

Ohio has developed a state-wide curriculum entitled “Ohio Academic Content Standards” which dictates what skills and learning outcomes are desired in each of four core content areas (Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies) on examinations which span from Kindergarten to 12th grade (Ohio Department of Education, 2007). In Ohio, students are given examinations (Ohio Department of Education, 2007) to measure
the degree to which they have mastered the state curriculum. For high school students, these tests are collectively and currently known as the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT). These examinations provide accountability on two levels. First, students must pass all five content area examinations in order to graduate with a high school diploma. Ohio wants to ensure that all students who receive a high school diploma demonstrate a high level of achievement. (Ohio Department of Education, 2007). Individual achievement is rated based on the number of points scored above a determined “cut score” that is the result of scaling. (Ohio Department of Education, 2007) In addition, individual school districts are placed into one of five categories based on the percentage of those students who pass state mandated tests in grades 3 through 10, as well as the district’s graduation rate and attendance rate. (Ohio Department of Education, 2007). In addition, schools must meet the requirements of attaining Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as specified in The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (P.L. 107-110). (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

The five categories of academic achievement for an Ohio school district are (from the highest level of achievement to the lowest level of achievement): Excellent, Effective, Continuous Improvement, Academic Watch and Academic Emergency. The ratings are based on a school district’s ability to successfully meet designated indicators or achieve a minimum score on a calculated performance index (based on percentages of students that score at certain levels).

Challenges for Accountability Measures

Schools are spending considerable time and resources with new accountability standards like NCLB (Meyer, 2004). In response, research has begun to emerge detailing essential elements in meeting those standards. Lasley, Siedentrop, and Yinger (2006) discuss current studies on teacher quality in Ohio. They were interested in the degree to which teacher preparation programs have an impact on the student performance. Their work is based on the efforts of Sanders (1998) who suggested that a “value added approach” would normalize external effects of socio-economics in favor of a growth model where student performance is related to teacher performance. Bleeker and Jacobs (2004) also report that student achievement could also be related to parent’s attitudes and their influence on self-perception as it pertains to Math and Science. Some
of the literature also addresses technical inadequacies in reporting student progress. Kim and Sunderman (2005) discuss the problematic approach of determining “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) in schools that have high percentages of economically disadvantaged and African-American students. They report that, while progress could be measured, the categorization of some students in multiple categories posed unique challenges that were not fully addressed by the current Federal legislation in NCLB. Herman and Golan (1991) examine the effects of standardized testing on teachers and intervention strategies. Their research reaffirms previous studies that suggest a strong link between socio-economic strategies and educational delivery models. They report on what specific instructional and motivational elements were being used within classrooms. They concluded that teachers at low socio-economic schools (SES) report spending more of their time on test preparation activities than teachers at high SES schools.

**School Funding and Achievement relationships**

As recently as 2003, Ohio voters have rejected one half of all ballot box requests for additional local funding for their local schools (Hoff, 2003). In addition, the Ohio Supreme Court has ruled that the reliance of funding schools with local property taxes is unconstitutional (Zehr, 2003). Zehr (2003) reported that the State of Ohio has taken an increased role in funding schools in the state. In exchange for this funding, state and federal agencies have required that districts demonstrate improve academic achievement and report this data by racial, economic, and disability subgroups. Failure to comply with these regulations could result in the loss of state and federal funds or increased governmental oversight (Hess and Finn, 2004). Poplin and Soto-Hinima (2005) have made observations that direct instruction may have promise as a way to boost the scores of students in high poverty districts. Chrisman (2005) has found that educational leadership may play a more significant role in boosting student achievement than teacher education and credentials. Empowering teachers to meet in group problem solving sessions as well as allowing them to have a larger role in their professional development choices has shown promise in a study of high poverty schools in California (Chrisman, 2005).

Teachers and administrators in Ohio are under pressure to improve student test scores (Delisero, 2007). Teachers in at least one Ohio School District are engaged in a
program of professional development out of a concern that they need to meet the 
standards that have been set by Ohio and the U.S. Department of Education (AYP).  
(DeGenova, 2007). Although DeGenova’s report is one anecdote from an Ohio school 
district, undoubtedly such practices are not uncommon. What specific programs and 
attitudes must be in place to ensure that high-achieving as well as low-achieving Ohio 
school districts meet the standards of the state and federal government?

Caldas and Bankston (1997), in their study of high school students in Louisiana, 
made distinctions between high and low socio-economic status based on elements such as 
participation in the free/reduced lunch program, a parent’s educational attainment, and a 
parent’s occupation (unskilled labor, skilled labor, manager/professional). Caldas and 
Bankston (1997) concluded that a family’s socio-economic status had a significant and 
substantial influence on student test scores.

However, Miles and Darling-Hammond (1998) researched the practices of five 
high achieving schools in various urban areas around the United States. Miles and 
Darling-Hammond (1998) suggested that a reduction in specialized courses, longer 
instructional periods, common planning time, and flexible student grouping were all 
common elements in improved student achievement. In their conclusion, Miles and 
Darling-Hammond (1998) suggest that what some urban schools were doing was only 
“scratching the surface” in terms of rethinking traditional designs of educational 
programs. Miles and Darling-Hammond (1998) further suggest, in their conclusion, that 
schools must take into account their current practices, skills and resources when looking 
at a design that may provide for a more personalized education for students.

Shannon and Bylsma (2003) reported that there were nine characteristics of high 
performing schools. Those characteristics included a clear and shared focus, effective 
educational leadership, focused professional development, curriculum aligned with state 
standards, and a supportive learning environment (Shannon and Bylsma, 2003). Another 
claim is that student achievement gains are consistent with delivering motivational 
techniques that do not create tension between students and teachers (Shannon and 
Bylsma, 2003). Shannon and Bylsma (2003) further claim, in their research, the highly 
performing schools that the studied performed in spite of, in some cases, high poverty 
conditions. They cited effective leadership that focused on student learning as well as
using data to improve student performance in schools (Shannon and Bylsma, 2003). This would appear to transcend the earlier research of Caldas and Bankston (1997) that found a strong correlation SES and test scores. Existing research suggests that using certain practices (Shannon and Bylsma, 2003, Miles and Darling-Hammond, 1998) may correlate more directly with student achievement than socio-economic status (Caldas and Bankston, 1997). Effectively executed plans and programs that address both educational preparation and motivational techniques appear to be used in schools that are experiencing educational growth (Shannon and Bylsma, 2003). This research seeks to examine this hypothesis in terms of current educational practices in Southwest Ohio high schools.

**Purpose of Study**

This research seeks to examine factors that are believed to influence student achievement, academic preparation and motivation (Miles & Darling-Hammond, 1998, Shannon & Bylsma, P. 2003) as they relate to the OGT. It sought to address whether these ideas were common throughout multiple groups or were they restricted to just one particular group.

This research divides teachers into three groups based on their school’s recent academic ratings by the Ohio Department of Education. This study’s goal is to determine what programs and techniques that differently rated schools have in common and what methods are unique to a particular group. (e.g.: Is there a difference in practices between what a school that has been designated as “excellent” is doing versus a school that is designated as being “effective”?) By reflecting on the techniques that are used in each group, educational professionals can better adjust their programs and delivery model to better reflect what schools “at the next level” are doing to maintain a high level of academic achievement, or what they need to do in order to maintain an excellent rating for a sustained period of time. The two parameters that will be examined in this report are lesson preparation and motivational techniques.

The research also seeks to learn about the specific differences between schools that maintain an excellent rating versus schools that have maintained an effective rating. Is there a relationship between a teacher’s influence in decision making and a school’s academic category? Do teachers in “excellent” school districts report different attitudes
toward their approach to testing than teachers in “effective” schools? Do the students in “excellent” schools report higher degrees of tension about taking a test than students in effective schools? Is the concept of aligning the curriculum to the Ohio Academic Content Standards more effective than merely teaching and reciting test items? By addressing these questions, this paper seeks to gain insight into what Ohio schools are doing to effectively prepare students for the OGT.

Method

A convenience sample of 30 teachers from Southwest Ohio High Schools was selected based on their school’s performance on the recent Ohio local report cards. The participants were general and special education teachers, as the scores of special education students often prevent schools from achieving high ratings (Langfield, Thurlow and Scott, 1997).

Participants

Three subgroups were selected to determine teacher impressions on both an individual and systemic level in their school. Ten teachers in each subgroup are given a survey to complete. Each respondent is a teacher in a High School located in Southwestern Ohio. The teachers selected were 70% female, and 30% of the participants were special education teachers. All of the teachers reported teaching core academic courses (Math, Science, Social Studies, and English). The groups were assigned as follows:

Group I: Teachers selected from two high schools located in school districts that were rated “excellent” on both the 2005 and the 2006 OGT administrations.

Group II: Teachers selected from two high schools located in school districts that improved from an “Effective” rating to an “Excellent” rating from 2005 to 2006

Group III: Teachers selected from two high schools located in school districts that improved from a “Continuous Improvement” rating to an “Effective” rating from 2005 to 2006

For the purposes of group categorization, definitions are based on the current guidelines for the ratings for the State of Ohio are shown in Table 1. The characteristics of the schools (shown in Table 2) show that schools in Group III have a higher percentage of economically disadvantaged students than those in group I and group II. A
similar increase in students with disabilities is also noted in group III as opposed to groups I and group II. The percentage of teachers with a M.Ed. is higher in groups I and II than it is in group III.

**Procedures**

The sample for this survey was a convenience sample. The teachers selected were 70% female. 30% of the teachers were special education teachers. They were asked if they wanted to participate in the survey by receiving an email letter with a request (Appendix A). The participant was provided with a statement that detailed their rights as participants in the study (Appendix B) as well as the survey questions (Appendix C). The Teachers then completed the survey and mail it back to the author for analysis. Permission to participate was implied by returning the survey. The response rate of the survey was 85% based on responses that were returned to the author.

**Instrument**

The survey consisted of two parts. The survey sought to determine the degree to which teachers were using certain motivational techniques in their class, as well as what preparation activities they used to prepare students for the OGT. The first part consisted of 15 Likert-type questions about how teachers perceived systemic and personal strengths as they directly related to student success on the O.G.T. This section of the survey was directly drawn from a survey instrument created by Herman and Golan (1991). Fifteen questions were selected from their instrument based on their relevance to an Ohio teacher (or school) that is working on improving their OGT preparation plan. Of the fifteen questions, seven sought to determine the degree to which teachers agreed with statements about their own personal beliefs. Four questions asked which elements or procedures the teachers felt were most related to their school’s success on the OGT. These questions were directly drawn from tables 6, 17 and 20 in a survey instrument discussed by Herman and Golan (1991). An additional four questions were asked in order to determine the degree to which a teacher agreed with generic statements as it pertained to school pride, testing and its effect on students. These were adopted from tables 22b and 22c from the survey discussed by Herman and Golan (1991). The questions were selected based on the themes of preparation and motivations that fit into this paper’s focus. The second part of the survey consisted of an additional three open ended questions. The respondent was
given the opportunity to expand on some of probes that were covered in the multiple choice questions. These questions were developed by the investigator in order to gain additional insight into the perceptions and programs of teacher in each of the three groups.

*Data Analysis*

Quantitative analysis consisted of obtaining the mean score of the accumulated responses to gain some basic insight into trends between the three groups. To determine significance, a Chi-Square analysis was applied to determine the significance between groups and the questions on the Likert-style questions. Qualitative analysis involved coding the open-ended responses that were the final three questions of the survey instrument. Using the techniques described by Thomas (2003), this paper has taken an inductive approach to this analysis. First, the responses were read in detail in order to gain understanding of the meaning and understand “themes” that emerged from the work. From this, general categories were obtained. Second, appropriate responses were placed in multiple categories. Third, these categories were refined into specific categories that were then reported.

*Results*

Table 3 reports the mean scores that were obtained from questions related to current teacher practices and the influence that a teacher has on school decision making. Teachers in Group I reported that they were adjusting their curriculum on an occasional basis while teachers in Group III schools reported adjusting their curriculum on a regular basis as a result of last year’s OGT results. Question 2 showed a significant correlation between the school category (Group I, II, III) and whether or not teachers were adjusting their curriculum in response to previous examinations \((\chi^2 = 10.596)\). One question also asked the degree to which teachers had control over decision making in their classroom (question 7). The data suggested that teachers in group I had more influence over school decision making than those in groups II or III. There were no statistically significant correlations between types of schools and questions asked on question 1 or 3 through 7.

Table 4 describes the mean scores that were obtained from teachers as it related to what they believed to be OGT success factors. The questions sought to determine the degree to which a particular practice had on student success on the OGT. Group II
reported that changes in textbooks (question 10) played a minor factor in helping their school improve from effective to excellent. When groups I and II were combined, Question # 10 showed a significant difference between the combined group and Group III ($\chi^2 = 4.857$). Elements such as aligning instruction with test content (question 8), additional time spent on test taking skills (question 9) and changes in teaching effectiveness (question 11) were all cited as having a moderate degree of influence on their school’s success on the OGT by all groups.

Table 5 describes the mean scores that were obtained when school and personal attitudes were reported. These questions sought to gain some insight into environmental factors that may have a bearing on the testing environment. While all three groups reported that staff had a strong sense of pride (question 12), teachers in groups II and III reported that tests create tension for both teachers and students (question 14). Teachers in group I were neutral on this question. Question 14 showed a significant chi square difference between the three groups ($\chi^2 = 13.416$). All three groups believe teachers have a definite influence on how well students do (question 15). Teachers in all three groups disagreed with the statement that “Testing helps students improve understanding” (question 13).

There were also three open ended questions asked of each of the participants in each of three groups studied. The questions fall into the categories of motivating students, elements of preparations, and ideas for student motivation.

**Motivating Students**

The responses for this section were obtained from the first open ended question that asked “*How do you motivate students in your classroom*”? In the responses, two themes were most common among all teachers (Table 6). First, all groups reported that it was necessary to have a relationship with the student (15 out of 30 respondents). A second theme related to the use of using external motivators as a way to motivate students to do well on the OGT (10 out of 30 respondents).

Four out of ten respondents in Group I replied that building rapport with the students was essential in motivation. “*Understanding strengths and weaknesses*” and “*discussing long term goals*” were representative comments reported from this group. This was similar to Group II respondents who cited a need to take a personal interest in
the goals and needs of the students. Five of the ten respondents indicated that this was a way that they motivate their students. Comments included “teachers should care about the students” or “show an interest in them”. Elements of rapport building were noted by 6 of the 10 teachers in Group III. To this end, teachers in these schools appeared to be more focused on getting the students to “buy in” to the concept that school was relevant to their future and their daily lives (3 out of 10 respondents). Typical comments from group III teachers included “I try to show the students the relevance of the knowledge I am trying to share to their lives and futures” or “I try to show them how what we are doing will help them now as well as later”.

Another theme related to the use of external motivators as a method to inspire student achievement. In group I schools, 4 out of 10 respondents cited “grades”. This was closely followed by 3 out of 10 respondents in Group II. In Group III, none of the respondents mentioned grades as a motivator. However, they did (in 3 out of 10 cases) mention the use of “rewards” or “incentives” to inspire achievement. Typical comments from group II respondents included “rewards for goals achieved” and “encouragement with smiles/gestures”.

**Elements of Preparation**

To obtain the results for this section, teachers were asked “What elements of your school BEST prepare students to pass the Ohio Graduation Test?” (Table 7). The two major themes that came from this question related to the curriculum needs of their school as well as the need to practice specific OGT type questions.

Nine of the 30 respondents indicated a response that suggested that some aspect of the curriculum best prepared their students. Five out of ten Group I respondents replied that they felt that aligning the curriculum with the state standards was the item that the school did best in order to prepare students for the Ohio Graduation Test. Representative comments from this group included “curriculum absolutely aligned with state standards” and “aligned curriculum”. Two respondents from both groups II and III made reference to “curriculum” or “curriculum mapping” in their responses.

Ten of the 30 respondents reported that a review of old OGT tests and practicing examples that have appeared on previous tests were an important element of preparation. Group II and Group III participants reported that a review of old OGT tests were
effective in 4 out of 10 cases. Group II reported comments such as “practice OGT Test” and “reviewing old OGT tests” while group III respondents indicated that they reviewed these tests as well. Sample comments included “intensive prep with OGT materials”, “OGT standards specific review” and using an internet based program called “Study Island”. Group I respondents did not report the need to review old OGT tests as much as the other two groups (2 out of 10 respondents). Their comments included “motivating students to apply OGT material to their lives” and “staff pride and expectation”.

Ideas to Improve Student Instruction

The results for this section were obtained from open ended question “What is the ONE thing that schools can do to improve student instruction” (Table 8). In this question, the responses were split into two themes. One theme focused on elements of the school experience that could directly be influenced by the individual classroom teacher. Another theme expressed by the teachers was that certain aspects of the global school structure needed to improve.

Ten of the 30 respondents addressed what they could personally do could help improve student performance. Group I teachers (3 out of 10 respondents) believed that more student-centered projects were the one thing that schools could do to improve student instruction. Their comments included “need for more projects/in-depth activities material” and “students have the opportunity to apply knowledge”. Group II teachers mentioned the need for “more time writing” and more “hands on activities”. One group III teacher suggested that there be more “student accountability” and that they should “be harder on the students/raise the bar” as well as need for “more writing skills”.

In terms of more global aspects of their particular school’s structure, 13 of the 30 respondents suggested changes that would allow them to improve student performance. The specific needs varied by group. Two Group III respondents indicated that there need to be more “collaboration”; other elements such as a longer school year and improving daily attendance were needed. Three Group II participants suggested that “smaller class sizes” were needed as well as a need to higher “quality teachers”. Increased collaboration time as well as offering more one-on-one assistance was also cited by two group I teachers.
Discussion

In reviewing the surveys, two major elements were examined in terms of how teachers perceived the OGT. The first element dealt with instructional/preparation programs and the second dealt with motivational techniques. Within these contexts, teachers can examine their classrooms in order to see how they relate to what the larger group is accomplishing. It would also be helpful to learn what factor or factors teacher feel is most important in order to raise student achievement on the OGT.

Herman and Golan (1991) pose a number of questions that seek to gain some understanding as to the relationship between standardized testing and the effect that it has on teachers. They concluded that teachers at low socio-economic schools (SES) report spending more of their time on test preparation activities than teachers at high SES schools. While the groups for this study were not divided based on SES, there was a similar trend seen in the current study on the part of the Group III schools to report that they have spent more time on “test taking skills” than schools that were in group I. A casual observation of the characteristics of Group III schools shows a much higher rate of “economically disadvantaged” students than their counterparts in the Group I schools. One item did show a correlation between type of school and the need to adjust lesson plans in response to student test scores. This would suggest that it is important for teachers to reflect on their teaching as they guide their schools to higher academic levels. School districts that have been excellent (Group I) for two or more years reported reviewing old test materials at a slightly lower rate than their counterparts in groups II and III. The emphasis in Group I schools was on aligning curriculum to the standards. This was reported in the open ended questions and was found to have a statistically significant correlation in question # 2.

In reviewing the responses of the Group I teachers, they seemed to indicate that the most significant thing that schools can do is to align their curriculum to the standards. This might suggest that Group I schools teach the standards while Group III schools are teaching more specific problems/concepts that have appeared on recent tests. Group I schools report that their curriculum is aligned or “totally aligned” with the state standards. Teaching a rich curriculum on a year-round basis appeared to be more favored by those teachers in Group I, as opposed to groups II and III that reported relying more
on practice OGT tests and intensive review sessions. Group III responded that their schools had intense instruction in the period immediately before the test. One of the respondents referred to this an “OGT blitz”. This was not reported in Group I or Group II. This would appear to be related with the notion that there is more tension in schools that are effective than in the ones that are rated excellent (Table 5, question 14).

Although this was reported to be most evident in the Group I category, there is also evidence that such a “total alignment” of curriculum with state standards could work in all groups, regardless of socio-economic status. Bray and Challinor (2001) discussed similar efforts that have been taken to reduce achievement gaps between low income and high income schools in The Brazosport (Texas) Independent School District. Teachers in this district identified best practices, instructional strengths and weaknesses, and developed grade level pacing plans and benchmark assessments. In 2001, their efforts resulted in an “exemplary” designation by the Texas Education Agency (2001), which is roughly equivalent to an “excellent” rating in Ohio. This was an improvement over their 1997 rating of “recognized”, which is roughly equivalent to “effective” in Ohio (Bray and Challinor, 2001).

Motivation appears to take a more “general” approach in the Group I respondents. They report a global approach to student rapport. Their comments are more centered on the needs of their students as people (Noddings, 2005) than those in group III. Group III respondents (schools that were designated as being “effective”) reported rapport building within the context of school and the OGT. Comments such as “showing them how what we are doing now will help them later on” and “reminding them of the purpose of the lesson” suggest that group III respondents are trying to tie rapport building with the need to be successful in school. As reported by Shannon and Bylsma (2003), motivational techniques should be delivered in a way that is consistent with improving student achievement. The comments from Group I respondents were more global and general while Group III respondents were more pointed in what they felt that rapport building was supposed to accomplish. Typical comments from Group I respondents included “constant encouragement” and “trying to build rapport”. Group II respondents reported “keeping kids engaged” and “meeting with students one on one”. Group III respondents
reported “reminding them of the importance of the lesson” and “showing how what we are doing is relevant”.

Another area of interest, in terms of motivation, related to developing a rapport with students. Shannon and Bylsma (2003) reported on the need for a supportive learning environment. This appeared to be a quality that teachers in all three groups valued. However, question #14 of the Likert-style questions suggested that there were a correlation between group (I, II, or III) and their agreement with the question “Tests create tension for teachers and students”. Perhaps the tension could be rooted in the fact that the motivation that is given in Group III schools is test-specific rather than global. In their responses, Group III teachers did make their motivation more specific in terms of their need to do well on the test. Natriello and Pallis (1998) reported on significant pressure for schools to produce achievement results. This pressure may be having an impact on the type of motivation that the students are receiving.

In response to the question about the one thing that schools can do to improve student instruction, there was a diversity of opinion. Group I respondents suggested that more application projects and activities could help improve student instruction. Sample comments included “more student centered projects” and “give students ample opportunities to work with, learn, use, and apply OGT content material”. while Groups II and III focused on more administrative tasks such as reducing class size, higher accountability standards for students, improving daily attendance, and longer calendar years. Their comments included “hire quality teachers”, “be harder on students/raise the bar” and “improve daily attendance”.

Respondents from all three groups cited the need for more “student centered classrooms” or “remaining people oriented” or “teaching to all types of learners”. Noddings (2005) suggests that one of the flaws of recent educational reform legislation is its failure to educate “the whole child”. She discusses how the original intent of schools was to provide moral as well as academic instruction. She believes that education should also encompass a broader spectrum than just what is being tested for NCLB purposes, like Art or Character Education. She would appear to echo the sentiments of the participants of the current study who would like to see more of a focus on the student, as opposed to merely producing test results. Noddings also believes that small group
instruction is critical, but it should be done more frequently and in more informal settings, rather than just in projects for a grade.

Having a voice in the decision making process of a school appears to play a moderate role (across all three groups) in the education of students in each of the three groups studied in this research project. While Chrisman (2005) indicated that this element played a vital role in improving the quality of low poverty schools, it would appear (from the surveys) that this role is not emphasized in groups that were “effective” as much as it was in schools that were “excellent”.

One element that was markedly absent from the open ended portion of the surveys was the need for teachers to work together in a collaborative setting. Only one survey (Group III) mentioned that schools could improve if teachers were to “collaborate”. But this respondent noted that “schools do not give professionals time to do this”. Literature has reported that this key ingredient has resulted in academic gains for schools (Bray, 2001). In Brazosport, the educational programs involved a great deal of collaboration between teachers. (Bray, 2001). Extended teacher planning periods were provided to expand the unique programs that they felt that their students needed. It was also reported that much of the problem solving that was done in this school was done at the teacher level (Bray, 2001). There is justification in the research for common planning time and the need for smaller class sizes that were discussed as an element of school structure that needed to be addressed (Miles & Darling-Hammond, 1998). These elements were found to be key pieces to improvement in high achieving schools (Miles & Darling-Hammond, 1998).

Another element that appeared to be lacking from the open ended responses was the need for expanded parent involvement. Only one respondent (in all three groups) indicated that this would be one thing that schools could do to improve student performance. Their comment specifically noted that they wanted to see “parents taking more responsibility for their (child’s) learning”. The results infer that essential elements for improving OGT performance do not necessarily involve a larger, more expanded role, for a student’s parent.
Limitations of Study

There are several limitations of this study. First, the sample size is very small and is not representative of Ohio teachers in similarly rated schools, as such there are few statistically significant differences. This research is also subject to the limitations of self-reported data. An observational component was not included. The data makes no statement with regards to the differences in attitudes based on a teacher’s race, gender, years of experience, or subject that is being taught.

Future Research

Future research should include a focus on questions that seem to draw a clearer distinction between excellent and effective schools as well as a larger, more representative sample. A survey might include distinctions based on race and socio-economic status, two elements that were not considered in the surveys submitted by teachers. Would the OGT preparation and motivation techniques differ based on the experience and education level of the teacher? This paper focused on the general themes of preparation and motivation that were discussed in the work by Herman and Golan (1991). The responses suggested that a number of questions that could be explored in future research. First, how are schools adjusting their lesson plans in the “effective” schools? Are these adjustments teacher or administration driven? What elements of teacher empowerment are given to teachers in “excellent” schools” that are not given to those in schools that are rated to be effective? What specific strategies are used in “excellent” schools to motivate students that are not used in those that are rated “effective”? What strategies are effective or ineffective at moving schools up to the next level? In-depth observational studies of school environments would also be helpful. By refining research, teachers and policy makers could have more powerful tools to assist them in achieving the improvement goals that they need in order to continue to receive state and federal funding.

In conclusion, this research project has shown that there may be differences in instructional preparation and motivational techniques for the Ohio Graduation Test among differently rated high-achieving schools. In reviewing the responses, it would appear that schools that wish to be designated as “excellent” may need to make adjustments to their structure and operational methods. For example,
schools that are judged as being effective for two or more years may not focus as much energy on specific programs as those in schools that are “on their way” to becoming excellent. Schools that are on their way to maintaining an “excellent” status may be more likely to adjust their lesson plans as a result of previous testing results. The research in this paper suggests that the difference may be statistically significant. Another statistically significant difference was found in the use of curriculum aligned textbooks in excellent schools. Schools that wish to aspire to that level may wish to consider purchasing materials that cover the Ohio Academic Content Standards in an efficient manner. Teachers in “excellent” schools reported caring about students in the global sense while teachers in “effective” schools reported caring about students having specific goals. This appeared to translate into a significant statistical difference the level of tension of students in “effective” schools versus the level of tension of students in “excellent schools”. This research suggests that what is being done to prepare students at one academic level may or may not translate to other levels. It has also shown that some elements of teacher instruction and motivation may be used regardless of the school’s academic rating. These elements included the need for a student centered classroom as well as the need to spend additional time in order to develop skill sets. Teachers and school administrators should pay close attention to what is being used in schools at the “next level” to which they are aspiring.

The educational implications of this paper include school improvement practices that may vary depending on a school’s academic rating. It is possible that the degree to which a particular intervention may be appropriate may be more related to where the school is located on the continuum of Ohio academic ratings then other factors such as degree of teacher education or socio-economic status. Money for the operation of public schools in Ohio is becoming increasingly dependent on student achievement and improvement in various subgroups (Hess and Finn, 2004). Since the concept of using local money to fund the operations of a school has been found to be unconstitutional (Delisaro, 2007), more emphasis will be placed on satisfying the needs of the state educational authorities as opposed to the needs of the local community. Motivation may need to be delivered in a way that is consistent with improving student achievement (Shannon and Bylsma, 2003) and not in increasing tension between students and teachers.
Preparation may include updating academic materials and resources that are aligned with the State Academic Content Standards.

These surveys show the relative teacher perception of various motivational and instructional techniques in order to improve student achievement. If a school wishes to improve their academic rating, they should examine the methods of those schools that are performing at the level that they aspire to. Failing to adopt successful models could result in a number of schools losing some of their state and federal funding to alternatives that may or may not be acceptable to parents, teachers, and students.
References


Zehr, M. Ohio Court Declares End to DeRolph Case. *Education Week, 22*(30), 15.
Appendix A – Solicitation Letter

Dear Colleague:

Hello. My name is Paul Yeckel and I am a teacher at Winton Woods High School. I am currently working toward my Master’s Degree in Educational Psychology. As a High School teacher, I am working on a research thesis that involves the Ohio Graduation Test. Specifically, I am interested in what teachers believe are important factors toward passing the OGT. I would also like to compare what schools are doing in terms of preparation.

I would appreciate your help in completing this enclosed questionnaire. Your responses will be kept confidential. Please return the survey in the enclosed postage-paid envelope. If you would like to learn about the results of the survey, please e-mail me at PNY372@aol.com.

If you have any questions, please contact me there as well.

Thank you

Paul Yeckel
Appendix B – Statement of Rights of Participants

*Teacher Perception of Success Variables on The Ohio Graduation Test*

Procedures: You will be asked to participate in a survey as part of this study. Participation is expected to take less than five minutes. No risks are anticipated.

Right to Privacy: In order to maintain individual confidentiality, you will be assigned an ID number, and all information gathered about and from you will be coded with that ID number. Your name will not appear on any record. All information collected will be maintained in a private office at Miami University.

Participant’s Rights: Your involvement in this research project is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from this project at any time. You may refuse to answer any and all questions without penalty. Withdrawal from this project, or refusal to participate, will not adversely affect you in any way. If you have any questions or concerns, or would like more information about the study, please contact Dr. Leah Wasburn-Moses (513-529-0409). If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant in this project, you may also contact the Office for the Advancement of Scholarship and Teaching (513-529-3734 or humansubjects@muohio.edu) at Miami University.

Returning the enclosed questionnaire constitutes your consent to participate in the study.
Appendix C – Survey

**Teacher Perception of Success Variables on The Ohio Graduation Test**

Please indicate your feelings on the following questions by circling the answer that most closely matches your feelings on the topic.

1- Never ; 2- Sometimes ; 3- Occasionally ; 4 Regularly; 5 Almost Always

1. I look at old/current tests to make sure that the content that I am teaching includes test content.  
2. I adjust my teaching plans according to last year’s test results.  
3. I adjust my curriculum sequence according to the tests  
4. I give worksheets that review test content  
5. I practice on test item format  
6. I teach test-taking-strategies  
7. You have influence on school decision making

For the following questions, I would like you to consider the factors that contributed to your school’s success on the OGT. Circle the number that corresponds to it’s contribution.

1- No factor ; 2- minor factor ; 3- moderate factor ; 4- major factor

8. Alignment of instruction with test content  
9. Additional time spent on test-taking skills  
10. Changes in textbooks (aligned with standards)  
11. Changes in teaching effectiveness

The following questions pertain to your feelings on the following questions:

1- Definitely Disagree ; 2- Disagree; 3- Neutral; 4- Agree;;; 5- Definitely Agree

12. Staff in our school have a strong sense of pride  
13. Testing helps students improve understanding  
14. Tests create tension for teachers and students  
15. Teachers can influence how well students do

The following questions pertain to your feelings on the following questions:

1. How do you motivate students in your classroom?  
2. What elements of your school BEST prepare students to pass the Ohio Graduation Test?  
3. What is the ONE thing that schools can do to improve student instruction?
Table 1

*Ohio School District Categorizations (Ohio Department of Education)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Performance Index</th>
<th>AYP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>24-25</td>
<td>100-120</td>
<td>MET*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective</td>
<td>19-23</td>
<td>90-99.9</td>
<td>MET*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuous Improvement</td>
<td>13-18</td>
<td>80-89.9</td>
<td>MET</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Watch</td>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>70-79.9</td>
<td>NOT MET</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Emergency</td>
<td>0-8</td>
<td>0-69.9</td>
<td>NOT MET</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“*” If a school district goes more than two years without meeting the Federal Definition of AYP, the highest category that they can achieve is “Continuous Improvement”. Also, if a school district has met AYP, the lowest definition that they can achieve is “Continuous Improvement”. AYP refers to meeting the qualifications set forth for achieving “Adequate Yearly Progress” as stipulated by attaining achievement standards for subgroups as provided by the 2001 NCLB law.

(1) Indicators refer to various requirements that The State of Ohio has established. One is graduation rate, one is attendance rate, the other 23 are based on test scores obtained by students on the various achievement and graduation tests administered in grades 3 through 10.

(2) Performance Index (PI) is a calculation that is based on assigning a certain number of points to each percentage that scores excellent, effective, etc. The
points range from assigning a 1.2 for an “Advanced” performance to a 0.3 for a performance rated as “limited”. Thus, if 100% of the students tested as “advanced”, their PI would be 120.

(3) “Meeting” AYP is defined as having met both the participation and improvement scores for the subgroups as defined in NCLB. AYP requires that all of these subgroups have a minimum percentage of the students test a the proficient level or higher. A failure of one of the subgroups to meet any of these goals will result in a NOT MET for this requirement.
### Table 2

*Survey Group Characteristics (Ohio Local Report Cards, 2006)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group I Schools</th>
<th>Group II Schools</th>
<th>Group III Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Schools that have been rated Excellent for two or more years for both 2005 and 2006”</td>
<td>“Schools that have been rated Effective in 2005 and then Excellent in 2006”</td>
<td>“Schools that have been rated Effective for both 2005 and 2006”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American%</td>
<td>7.9 % 3.5 %</td>
<td>10.7 % &gt; 0.1 %</td>
<td>9.8 % 66.1 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Disadvantaged%</td>
<td>8.3 % 3.7 %</td>
<td>13.6 % 11.4 %</td>
<td>53.6 % 30.7 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with Disabilities%</td>
<td>8.9 % 9.4 %</td>
<td>13.5 % 11.7 %</td>
<td>17.1 % 18.2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of teachers with M.Ed.</td>
<td>60.7 % 57.9 %</td>
<td>58.5 % 63.3 %</td>
<td>54.6 % 50.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Per Capita Income</td>
<td>$29,799 $28,467</td>
<td>$24,566 $18,701</td>
<td>$17,493 $21,341</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3

*Teacher Practices*

(1- Never; 2- Sometimes; 3 – Occasionally; 4- Regularly; 5- Almost Always)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Group I Mean (n=10)</th>
<th>Group II Mean (n=10)</th>
<th>Group III Mean (n=10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I look at old/current tests to make sure that the content that I am teaching includes test content</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I adjust my teaching plans according to last year’s results</td>
<td>3.0 s</td>
<td>3.2 s</td>
<td>4.0 s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I adjust my curriculum sequence according to the tests</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I give worksheets that review test content</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I practice on test item format</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I teach test-taking strategies</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. You have influence on school decision making</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

s Difference significant at p < .05
Table 4

*Teacher Reported Success Factors*

(1 – No Factor ; 2- Minor Factor ; 3- Moderate Factor ; 4- Major Factor )

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Group I</th>
<th>Group II</th>
<th>Group III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=7)</td>
<td>(n=10)</td>
<td>(n=10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Alignment of instruction with test content</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Additional time spent on test-taking skills</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Changes in textbooks (aligned with standards)</td>
<td>2.3 s</td>
<td>1.7 s</td>
<td>3.0 s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Changes in Teaching Effectiveness</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

s Difference significant at p < .05 when Groups I and II were combined and compared with Group III
### Table 5

*School and Personal Attitudes*

(1- Definitely Disagree; 2- Disagree; 3- Neutral; 4- Agree; 5- Definitely Agree)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Group I Mean (n=7)</th>
<th>Group II Mean (n=10)</th>
<th>Group III Mean (n=10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12. Staff in our school have a strong sense of pride</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Testing helps students improve understanding</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Tests create tension for teachers and students</td>
<td>3.0 s</td>
<td>4.4 s</td>
<td>4.3 s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Teachers can influence how well students do</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

s Difference significant at p < .05
Table 6

*Themes: “How do you motivate students in your classroom?”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1: Building Rapport</td>
<td>15 out of 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non specific Rapport Building</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group I</td>
<td>4 out of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group II</td>
<td>5 out of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group III</td>
<td>3 out of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Rapport Building</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group III</td>
<td>3 out of 10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Theme 2: Using tangibles      | 10 out of 30|
| Use of Grades                 |             |
| Group I                       | 4 out of 10 |
| Group II                      | 3 out of 10 |
| Use of Rewards                |             |
| Group III                     | 3 out of 10 |
Table 7

*Themes: “What Elements of your school BEST prepare students to pass the Ohio Graduation Test?”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 1: Curriculum Issues</strong></td>
<td>9 out of 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alignment of Curriculum to Standards</td>
<td>4 out of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group I</td>
<td>3 out of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group III</td>
<td>1 out of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic References to Curriculum</td>
<td>4 out of 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group I</td>
<td>2 out of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group II</td>
<td>2 out of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum “Mapping”</td>
<td>1 out of 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group III</td>
<td>1 out of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 2: Use of Practicing questions from “OLD” OGT tests</strong></td>
<td>10 out of 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group I</td>
<td>2 out of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group II</td>
<td>4 out of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group III</td>
<td>4 out of 10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8

Themes: “What is ONE thing that schools can do to improve student instruction”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1: What Teachers Could Personally do</td>
<td>10 out of 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Student Based Projects</td>
<td>4 out of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group I:</td>
<td>3 out of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group II:</td>
<td>1 out of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on Writing More</td>
<td>2 out of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holding students to higher standards/accountability</td>
<td>2 out of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2 out of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2: School Structure Elements that Need Addressed</td>
<td>13 out of 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced Class Sizes</td>
<td>3 out of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase time for Collaboration</td>
<td>4 out of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6 out of 10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>