

# AN OPEN LETTER TO WYOMING EDUCATORS

March 2, 2009

Dear Colleagues:

I wrote this brief letter as I was preparing for a presentation to be made at this year's spring School Improvement Conference in Casper. In the fall of 2002, when I was a speaker at a similar school improvement soiree, I became interested—atypically so—in what was going on educationally in your state. You see, I learned shortly after the 2002 conference that Wyoming education officials were intending to create a brand new accountability test to satisfy the requirements of NCLB. It was to be a test designed to improve the quality of schooling in Wyoming. Clearly, this was going to be an initiative to watch. And I have been watching—closely—since that time. In this open letter, I'll describe what I think needs to happen instructionally if Wyoming is to truly capitalize on this test. **PAWS, you see, is a literally *unique* state accountability test.**

Okay, what's so darn distinctive about PAWS? Well, because I spend considerable time in other U.S. states, I believe all states *except yours* are afflicted with NCLB tests that don't give those states' educators a fair chance to be successful. About half of the NCLB tests in other states are slightly spruced-up versions of off-the-shelf nationally standardized achievement tests. Most of those tests have been augmented with a few new items intended to better align the tests with a state's official content standards. Yet, these accountability tests, augmented or not, must be built so they provide comparative interpretations of test-takers' scores. To do so, the items in these tests must create a sufficient spread of scores to permit fine-grained comparative interpretations. Thus, many items are linked to students' socioeconomic status or to students' inherited academic aptitudes, both of which are nicely spread-out and rather stable variables. But those items tend to measure what students bring to school, not what students learn there. Such items can make an accountability test *instructionally insensitive*, that is, unable to accurately measure instructional quality. The remaining state NCLB tests are "standards-based" exams supposedly measuring students' mastery of official state content standards. But because most states have far too many such standards, educators must guess each year about which content standards will be assessed (and always with too few items). These tests also turn out to be instructionally insensitive and, just as bad, provide unclear curricular targets for a state's educators.

In Wyoming, however, **PAWS was deliberately designed to (1) measure only a modest number of high-level cognitive skills, (2) describe those skills clearly, and (3) include enough items to measure a student's mastery of each skill.** Moreover, all the items used on PAWS are screened to eliminate instructionally insensitive ones.

If PAWS is going to have the positive impact on Wyoming education its architects foresaw, however, I am convinced that the state's teachers must meaningfully modify how they now instructionally address PAWS skills. Accountability tests, all by themselves, can't make instruction better. But when teachers take full advantage of an instructionally oriented accountability test's key features, *then* teaching improves.

Okay, what should Wyoming teachers do to get the maximum instructional bounce out of PAWS? Well, here are my ideas. Whether you are a teacher or an administrator, please do whatever you can to encourage more teachers to adopt the following three suggestions. **Suggestion 1: Acquire a fuzz-free understanding of each of the 22 PAWS skills in language arts and mathematics.** Clarity of instructional intent is one of the most powerful contributors to a teacher's instructional planning. By using the assessment descriptions accompanying each PAWS skill, teachers can gain an intellectually rigorous understanding of the key elements of every PAWS skill.

**Suggestion 2: Use formative assessment to promote students' mastery of as many PAWS skills as possible.** Persuasive evidence now exists to show that teachers' use of the formative-assessment process can dramatically improve students' learning. Thus, Wyoming teachers need to understand what's involved in formative assessment, and employ it appropriately when promoting students' acquisition of PAWS-assessed skills. Well-understood formative assessment, if used by Wyoming teachers to help students master well-understood PAWS skills, will lead to impressive improvements in students' achievements. **Suggestion 3: Capitalize on all skill-focused information supplied by WDE.** If teachers use the WDE skill-by-skill traffic signal reports and the instructional suggestions for PAWS skills from other Wyoming educators, then more defensible instruction decisions will almost certainly take place.

If Wyoming teachers follow these three suggestions, I am convinced that substantial improvements will be seen in students' mastery of the PAWS-assessed skills. But teachers need to realize that **this will not be instruction as usual.** What's called for is **a fundamental change** in the way teachers think about PAWS-assessed curricular targets, and how to promote students' mastery of them. Fortunately, unlike other states, because PAWS was created to be instructionally supportive *and* instructionally sensitive, **the effects of improved instruction will show up on PAWS.**

Let me close out with an analysis of why Wyoming teachers ought to do this. First off, if teachers capitalize on PAWS to enhance their instruction, several groups benefit. For openers, students themselves will be better taught. As a result, a teacher's school will be more successful. Then, from a personal perspective, a teacher's professional effectiveness will be substantially increased—and will *be seen* to increase. Finally, there are the students who are currently being taught in the other 49 states. If Wyoming can show that an instructionally oriented accountability test can trigger substantial improvements in students' achievement, then other states may follow suit. They should.

Respectfully submitted,

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