

# VSCC English Department's Best Essays 2009-10

## English Composition at VSCC: Expository Writing and Researched Argument

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## **Introduction**

The sixth edition of the *VSCC English Department's Best Essays* focuses on two major categories of writing that students at Volunteer State Community College do in the various English courses we offer: Expository Writing and Researched Argument. The purpose of this edition is to provide our faculty with helpful tools for teaching writing and critical thinking skills to our students by offering sample student essays, chapter introductions focused on modes-based writing and literary analysis, and quick tips to offer to students as they write and revise their essays.

As evidenced by the wide variety of student writings in this publication, Vol State students are offered creative writing assignments, and these student essays exhibit the elements essential to a college-level essay. These student submissions have been judged holistically based on the criteria for good writing: creatively developing ideas around a focused thesis statement, logically organizing thoughts into unified and coherent paragraphs under that thesis, understanding the student's purpose, considering the audience for whom a student is writing, and using appropriate language and proper documentation based on the rules for written communication. These criteria are the focus for the suggestions offered in the chapter introductions, and the Best Essays Committee believes that we have chosen a sample of student essays that best exemplifies these qualities of good college-level writing. Students whose essays are published

in *Best Essays 2009-2010* have allowed their writing to be edited for mechanics and usage.

As Laura Black, Director of VSCC's Language Center, noted in the second edition of the Best Essays, "It is essential that our students understand how their abilities to think critically and to express their ideas in written communication have an impact on our society, our culture, and our everyday life." With this understanding, our students will become more effective communicators so they may become more successful in a world that demands an awareness of our environment and our place within it.

This edition includes student essays submitted between the Summer 2009 and Spring 2010 semesters, and it is representative of the diversity of the types of students in writing and English classes at Vol State. Our number of submissions continues to grow, and we hope that our English faculty will continue to recommend to this contest the best students from their developmental writing, composition, literature, and film classes as a way to recognize their hard work and their creative approaches to writing assignments.

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August 15, 2009

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**SECTION 1:**  
**EXPOSITORY WRITING**

## **Narrative Writing**

Narration is frequently the first assignment in most English 1010 Composition classes but may also be assigned in other classes or used as support in other types of essays. Although students and teachers often view narrative writing as one of the simplest forms of writing, there are actually many skills a writer needs to effectively convey meaning in this form.

The purpose of narrative writing is to tell a story with which an audience can relate or from which an audience can learn. Narratives must have both a cohesive plot and a central point of significance to be complete; you cannot have one without the other. While many narratives may use a clear thesis statement to present the main idea of the story, others are not so explicit. The thesis in any narrative, however, should reveal the purpose or reason for telling the story in the first place so that the audience can understand the story's underlying significance or relevance to their own lives.

Narratives are organized around the plot points of the story a writer is telling and developed with the most important details. Often, a writer will start the paper at the beginning of the story and tell us the story straight through. Another way of organizing a narrative is to tell the story as a series of flashbacks where the plot is interrupted in well-chosen places with commentary by the writer. Once the writer has a purpose, thesis, and method of organization, he or she can begin to develop the plot of the story.

Often students can get bogged down in all the possible details they can include in their narrative. For example, if the writer is telling a story about a childhood baseball game, he may be tempted to tell his audience about the uniforms, the weather conditions of the day, and how many people were watching the game. While all of these details help create a precise picture of that baseball game, they may not have anything to do with the point the writer is making, i.e. the writer's specific purpose. A good rule for developing narratives is to include details about emotions and thoughts of the central characters, and descriptions of the most important objects and places to give the audience clues that will lead the audience to the central purpose of the story.

When a student writes a narrative, it is important to keep in mind the fact that the reader might not be as familiar with the events and places as the writer is. Consequently, the writer should try to include details that will make the readers see the characters and events of the story as if they were watching the story play out in front of them. An audience should be able to anticipate the point the story is making and follow the plot of the story without confusion. Narrative writing, at its best, will take an audience through some chronological version of events and reveal to them something that they can learn through the experiences of others.



### Quick Tips for Students:

1. Pay close attention to the assignment requirements for length when determining the timeframe for your narrative. Especially in English 1010 essays that are usually shorter in length, it sometimes helps to consider narrowing the timeframe for the body of the essay to the most significant part of a day, an hour, or even a portion of an hour. Then, student writers can employ methods of flashback or use introductory paragraphs to offer essential background information (exposition) for the narrative.
2. Prioritize when it comes to choosing the most important details, characters, and events for developing a narrative, but make those details, characters, and events vivid for your readers by employing methods of description and appealing to the five senses. Keep your audience in mind by understanding that they may not be as familiar with the people, places, and things that make up your story, so you may need to offer a little more description for those people than you would for others.
3. Don't forget to include dialogue in your narrative, but choose dialogue that reveals something about the characters or the relationships between the characters who are speaking to one another.

## The Close Call -- Prize Winner

*"The Close Call" combines vivid descriptive detail with a concise narrative structure to create suspense. Through careful word choice, the writer is able to impart a feeling of discomfort in a beautiful, but threatening environment: "ravens scavenge"; windows are barred; a "waiflike blonde" is a cashier (with echoes of vampire legends), and the intense cook has "ermine eyes" (with a touch of the bestial). This essay effectively arranges detail to unsettle the reader with the tale of an "unsettling event."*

John Fields

Bobbie Kilbane

English 1010

29 March 2010

### The Close Call

Canada is a beautiful country in October. All of the leaves have fallen from the trees, and only the diesel behemoths travel the desolate highways. The aurora borealis is usually in full swing when the sun sets. It rains down its faded greens, pinks, and purples onto the lonely road to Alaska. Caribou graze on the roadsides while ravens scavenge the bones of any beast unlucky enough to fall prey to the diesel giant's wheels. One of the most unsettling events of my life occurred while I was navigating the Alaskan Highway through British Columbia into the Yukon Territory.

Fuel is a valuable commodity in the open wilderness of the great North. Every time I saw a sign for gasoline, I stopped and topped off my tank. I

learned quickly that it could be anywhere from one to two hundred miles before I saw another station. Most of the tiny stores bar their windows after October first. The end result is a plethora of signs for fuel and services, but very few stores are actually open for business. I passed a sign which stated "Next fuel 245 Km." The sun was starting to set, and I had about half a tank of gas. Coincidentally, I had just enough fuel to reach the destination described in the sign. I felt a touch of worry as I realized that this place may not be open at all. The biggest problem I had with running out of gas in the forest was becoming an immediate part of the food chain when my truck stopped. I was losing daylight fast. I sojourned on. I hoped and prayed that there would be fuel at the destination.

Two hours later, I pulled into the town of Toad River with my gas gauge hovering just under one quarter of a tank. I call it a town, but it was really a post office, restaurant, and double bay garage all in the same building. As I turned into the parking lot, I noticed there were no other vehicles in sight. I pulled up to the antique, faded red gas pump and got out of my truck. As I exited the vehicle, I smelled food in the air. Relief washed over me as I realized the restaurant was open. I knew with absolute certainty that I was going to be able to fuel my truck and maybe even grab a bite to eat. I turned to the pump. Tacked on its rusted red face, above the metal flap numbers, was a note that read "CASH ONLY." I only had thirty-seven Canadian dollars. "There will be no cheeseburger and fries for me tonight," I

thought as I began to pump fuel for all the cash I was carrying. The cold wind bit into my bearded face as I watched the metal numbers denoting price and liters flick away under the hum of an orange arc sodium light. When I finished pumping and headed through the empty parking lot towards the front door of the establishment, I noticed all the shutters on the windows were drawn.

I opened the door and stepped inside. The restaurant was full, but as soon as I entered, all conversation stopped. There were easily thirty people in the dining room. The silence descended like a black curtain. Every twinkling eye settled on me, the outsider. Had I interrupted some clandestine meeting? Where were all the cars? Where were the houses? I began to feel impending doom as I approached the young, waiflike, blonde at the cash register. Behind the register was a small, open kitchen. The cook, steel gray hair slicked to one side with pomade, stared me down with his ermine eyes. He did not budge; he simply gazed into me with a dripping fry basket in his left hand. I tried to speak to the girl at the counter, but my voice cracked terribly as I attempted to tell her how much fuel I bought. She seemed very nervous as she took my money, never making eye contact, and handed me a poorly written receipt. Not a sound emanated from the patrons as I exited the building. I tried my best not to turn around and look as I half ran to my truck. I knew I was being watched, and I was next on the list of whatever these people and their invisible cars had planned. I reached

my truck, and the engine started with a roar. My foot was already on the gas pedal as I shifted into first.

I have been back to Toad River once since then, but that is a tale for another day. I still lie awake at night knowing there is a village of people doing private activities in a tiny mountain town in the great North. Always planning, never talking to outsiders, they may be there to this day. My heart pounds whenever I recall my truck racing away from that little place while the faded green aurora borealis stretched out over the arcane landscape.

## Escape

*The compelling narrative in "Escape" is based upon an assignment in English Composition to interview an older person who had experienced a significant life event. The voice in this essay is that of the person whose harrowing escape is presented by the writer, who uses the first person perspective to capture the speaker's fear, relief, and gratitude. The essay's organization and tone provide authenticity as the writer describes an experience that is not his own.*

Taylor Keith Wilkins

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15 April 2010

## Escape

In the 1960's, on the soil of Hue, Vietnam, war was imminent. Bombs exploded across the river from my house for days and days. I had, my whole life, never liked living there. I was not allowed to be myself, and being myself was something I wanted more than anything. America seemed to have more opportunities than where I was living, and that was what led to my decision to come to America. The many hardships and strenuous activities I endured along the way do not compare to the reward of never going back and not regretting my decision.

I first made my decision after my country fell into the hands of the Communists. I lost my right to go to college and further my education. I was not allowed to speak or think freely or have a good job. War was

everywhere. My home in Hue, the ancient capital city of Vietnam, happened to be just on the south side of the DMZ, the Vietnamese Demilitarized Zone. During the Tet Offensive, when the Communists overran South Vietnam's defense, US B-52 Stratofortresses covered part of the city with bombs. I could feel war in everything I did; my breakfast even seemed to taste like gunpowder every morning. I was fed up with it and finally came to grips with reality and said to myself, "If I do not get out of here, I'm going to never live a free life, and I might even die before this war is over." That's when I started to plan to leave my country for a new home.

My family knew of my decision to leave our country, and they did not approve. My mother, who loved me very much, kept telling me, "Than, I want a better life for you, but if you try to leave and are captured, they will kill you." But I understood the consequences. I was a healthy twenty-year-old who loved playing guitar and collecting stamps; my decision was already made. That night I started packing my bags. I had arranged to leave with a buddy of mine, Bao Ngo, whom I had grown up with. He told me that people were being secretly taken out of the country by boats along the Hue River.

The night of our escape was one I will never forget: the sweaty palms, aching stomach, and anxiety from waiting. It was 10:30 P.M. with curfew in effect, so Bao and I had to sneak out and meet at the school down the street from our houses. We ran from bush to bush to get to the back playground.

We had everything set by 10:45, and the boat we were to leave on was setting sail at 11:00, so we left to meet at the south side of the Hue River. When we arrived, four other people were already there. We were waiting for a seventh person. The guards on patrol almost seemed as if they knew we were trying to escape; every foot step we heard sounded like they were coming closer and closer. When the last person finally arrived, we took off. I have never been as scared as I was during these moments. The takeoff was a bit rocky, and I could feel that some water had splashed into the boat. It took ten minutes for us to reach the heavily guarded Hue Harbor. We barely made it through the field of lights and ships. We were in the ocean finally, but that did not mean the trip was getting any easier.

We sailed for days; I lost count after four. Food was scarce, and my stomach was not forgiving. Looking into the water I felt as if I were just a tiny child under the mercy of God for letting me escape. I just prayed we would make it to our destination. The next day at sunrise I was awakened by men and women screaming. They were yelling, "We found it; we found it!" We were here, one step closer to America in a refugee camp in Santa Cruz, Philippines. We were treated well, and while the food wasn't the best, it was food nevertheless. We told them what we had done to get there and what we were trying to do. They told us they could get us a temporary green card and move us to a camp in the US. Everyone, including me,



started to weep. We were so happy to have made it. I could not believe we had done it.

In America my life became so different. I took up new hobbies. I started to play tennis and soccer. I was treated as a human being, not just something to advance the country. It was about me for once in my life. I ended up finding the love of my life, settling down, and starting a family. Moving to America was possibly one of the great decisions of my life, and I cannot explain the rewards that have come from doing it.

Enduring the many hardships and strenuous activities does not compare to the reward of never going back, nor regretting my decision. I would never have believed as a little boy growing in Hue that I would one day be faced with destruction and terror and be able to do something about it. I would never have pondered the thought of actually escaping my country under its evil rulers and going to a country I am proud to be part of. I love living here; I love being able to have truly FREE thoughts and speech, and I love not being persecuted for not following everyone else. I am proud to have escaped my country, and I am proud to be an American.

## Using Cool

*"Using Cool" demonstrates that definition essays can be humorous and interesting. The writer has a clear voice which occasionally provides an interesting commentary on the examples supporting his thesis about how the multiple meanings for the word "cool" can be confusing and contradictory. The essay also supports an extended definition by using comparison-contrast between the perspectives of the writer and his mother about the usage of the word "cool."*

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30 April 2010

### Using "Cool" Today and Yesterday

Sometimes even the dictionary doesn't have all the uses or spellings for a word. Sometimes we use what is known as slang. One of *Webster's Dictionary's* definitions for the word "cool" is "very good, fashionable, or hip." This definition is considered slang. The original word came from two different sources: Greek and Latin. The standard definition of the word back in my grandfather's day was that something was the opposite of hot. Today, "hot" and "cool" can be the same thing. Oh, the confusion.

"Cool" is a subjective word, subject to what people think about the situation. Today, slang versions of the word are used. The slang spellings have the same meaning as the correct spelling. One way to spell cool is "kool." Another way to spell cool is "kwel." Who knows what other variations

will come up in the next few years or decades? Maybe, the word will be abandoned altogether.

The way "cool" is interpreted based on a person's perspective. Everyone has his or her own point of view. The other day, a white fluffy fog rolled in. I thought that the fog was cool whereas my mom thought the fog was dangerous and scary because she had to drive in it while it was still dark. When I received a new computer recently, I thought that it was the coolest thing. My mom thought that the computer was not cool because having a new computer meant that she would have to learn a new operating system. Clearly, what is "cool" to one person can be very taxing or negative to another -- thus, the dilemma. Growing up, I never thought there could be so much difference attributed to the same word; however, upon further thought, I realize how very wrong I was.

So many visions come to mind when I think about the word "cool," regardless of the spelling. One thought could be the latest video game. Boy, is that cool? Some girl might think a guy strutting down the street in an Armani suit was cool or wearing some worn out pair of jeans was cool for that matter. Another kid could think that the coolest thing on earth was a snow day. People who work Monday through Friday think that Fridays are cool because they know that there is a two day break from work and their bosses.

On the other hand, I might think that it was too cool to get in the pool. A news reporter comments regularly on how cool the weather was in the fall and spring. A bear or a squirrel might think that the weather was getting cool, so it would need to prepare for a hard winter.

Someone also might refer to someone as being really cool during a difficult situation. Look at that card shark who is cool as a cucumber, or the gunfighter was so cool that he never broke a sweat.

Back in the 1960's, the word "cool" was used a great deal depending on how high someone was. Every other statement, from what my mother tells me, was, "Hey man, that was cool." They also used the word "groovy" a lot at that time, but that is another story.

According to the *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, the word "cool" has quite a history. As early as the 1880's, this word meant more than the opposite of warm. Back then, its connotation was to be discreet as in "Don't lose your temper; "stay cool." Around 1918, "cool" was used to mean urbane or sophisticated. Shortly after World War II, the connotation evolved to mean excellent. It appears to me after investigating the term "cool," that today "cool" means all of the above. It should be interesting to see what meanings the next ten years bring to this word.

## **Descriptive Writing**

As part of the human experience, we take in and process the world around us through the use of our senses, and many times, we form opinions about objects, places, and people within our world based on the use of that sensory information. These sensory impressions are often the basis for our writing when we write a descriptive essay. The purpose of descriptive writing involves helping an audience understand more fully the subject of an essay, usually a person or place with which the audience is unfamiliar, and to create a dominant impression of that place or person.

The most explicit statement of that impression should be offered in the thesis of the descriptive essay. This thesis should show the audience the writer's plans to reveal something new or unconventional about the essay's subject. For example, a descriptive essay about an umbrella might have the following thesis: "While an umbrella is very useful in the rain, it also serves as an example of one of architecture's most useful elements—the arch." This thesis prepares the audience to look at an ordinary object in a new, more complete way, emphasizing the purpose and need for creating an essay to describe something.

Description can be used as a method of development for an entire essay, or it can be incorporated into other modes of writing, like narration, comparison/contrast, and definition to make those modes of writing more sensory experiences because descriptive papers seek to use language that

creates for the audience a vivid mental picture. Developing descriptions often means using similes and metaphors to describe something, invoking all five senses. For example, a writer may choose to describe eating a jalapeno pepper in the following way: "Once the tongue registers the heat of the pepper, it is as if your whole mouth expands in an attempt to get away from the flames but cannot quite stay out of reach." When an audience reads language such as this, they can understand the feeling much better than if you simply wrote, "Eating a jalapeno pepper makes your mouth hot." At its best, descriptive writing allows readers to close their eyes and see the event, person, object, or place being described in the essay. The ultimate goal is to create an impression and to convey your attitude towards that subject by offering the most revealing and significant details and anecdotes about the subject.

#### Quick Tips for Students:

1. Pay careful attention to the details and examples you include: all should work towards conveying a dominant impression of the subject of your description, and they should be the most important details and examples for the reader's understanding of that subject's significance to you and your audience.
2. Avoid over-idealizing or demonizing the subject of a description. Present your description as being objective and realistic. Nothing is completely good or bad, so describe the subject as something REAL. Don't forget to use sensory images, especially similes and metaphors, to draw your readers into the description.

3. When describing a person, choose the person for your description wisely. Avoid a person that will lead you to be overly sentimental, such as a family member or friend who has recently died. Choose, instead, a person who is somewhat unusual or engaging, not only to you, but to your audience.
4. Also, keep in mind that this is not a story about your experience, so remember that your purpose in describing is different from the narrative.

## **Writing Comparison/Contrast Essays**

Examining our world in terms of comparison and contrast is one of the most common intellectual activities we do on a day-to-day basis; it's the kind of thinking on which most practical decisions are based. These may be big decisions—choosing a college, buying a car, deciding on a career—or small decisions, such as what kind of shampoo to buy or where to go for pizza. In all of these activities, we are doing mental work—logically examining the information available to us and making a decision, based on that information. This decision results in our choice between two or more items or in our passing judgment on objects that are similar in some way, though not in all ways. In writing a comparison/contrast essay, we strive for the same goal except that in our writing, we explain the reasons behind our judgment to an audience outside of ourselves.

When writing comparison/contrast essays, we compare items to help our audience understand our choices or judgments. The audience comes to understand why we make the choices we do or come to a certain conclusion because we offer them the information that we have examined in order to come to that conclusion, information which they may or may not have had before reading our comparison. Many times, then, our purpose in writing is also to help people understand something with which they are not familiar. In such cases, we compare an object unfamiliar to the audience with



something familiar to them, forming a basis of comparison so that they can understand the type of object we are examining even if they have not directly encountered it in their own lives. Ultimately, we write comparison/contrast essays to share our knowledge about a subject with others and to persuade them to understand the subject in the way that we do, thus seeing our judgment as valid.

We make our judgment reasonable to our audience by deciding on specific points of comparison to ensure that we analyze our items based on the same criteria or standards for each item. For us, as writers, to set these criteria, the items we compare must be on the same level in some way; choosing items that are too different from one another makes it difficult to set standards that your audience would expect from both items. In our writing, we explain the similarities and differences between the items that we are comparing, illustrating how well those items live up to the expectations we have set for them. We pass judgment on the items, usually expressing a preference for one or noting the advantages of one over the other. This judgment is most explicitly stated in the essay's thesis, and writers support that judgment by comparing and/or contrasting the items in the essay's body paragraphs based on the criteria that we have previously set forth.

Quick Tips for Students:

1. Stick to two items for comparison and contrast because it's easier to manage.

2. Make sure that your items are comparable or are “on the same level.”
3. Avoid vague thesis statements such as “There are many similarities between item A and item B.” The audience cannot understand your perspective on or your judgment about those items based on this kind of thesis.
4. Understand that you may focus more on similarities *or* on differences; you do not have to treat both equally in your essay. However, even if you’re focusing more on one than on the other, you should include at least one consideration of difference or similarity to show your objectivity towards the subject and your understanding of the ultimate connection between the objects you are comparing.

## **Section II: Research Essays Based One to Four Sources**

## **Writing Claims of Fact**

As active participants in our world community, we come into contact with the conditions of the world around us every day—through interacting with the people around us, watching the news on television, reading a newspaper, or even attending the performance of a drama. These experiences and the knowledge that we gain from them can often make us want to share our knowledge with others, a responsibility many of the world’s citizens take seriously. Oftentimes, that responsibility leads to a desire to write in order to share our own knowledge—and the knowledge of reliable authorities—with others in our world. This desire results in our writing claims of fact.

Writers of claims of fact seek to offer factual information about past, present, or future societal conditions that involve specific communities or interest groups. Many times, our purpose in writing claims of fact is to discuss our reasons for disagreeing with some widely held belief, or because we endeavor to inform our audience about a condition in our society with which the audience is unfamiliar. For instance, we may write a claim of fact to explain why we see a condition in our society as a problem for a minority group by illustrating how that group of people is negatively affected by the beliefs and actions of the majority. On the other hand, we may write a claim of fact to explain how a specific group benefits from a program that has recently been implemented by our community. Thus, a claim of fact does

not have to focus only on the negative, but instead it focuses on simply offering information to an audience who does not have ready access to all the facts and, as a result, may be mistaken in their beliefs.

To strengthen our argument, we support claims of fact with factual information such as firsthand experiences, examples, statistics, and information from other reliable authorities whom the audience would be able to verify through their own research. Our argument is made sound by giving irrefutable evidence for the claims that we make, which are often inferences based on the factual evidence we have gathered. We typically can prove claims of fact without a doubt although there may at times be exceptions to the fact. The thesis statement should offer a comprehensive explanation of our attitude towards the issue on which the essay focuses. When writing a claim of fact, we should always write with a specific audience in mind, addressing those people or groups who would have a vested interest in the issue and how that issue is viewed by the community, or world, around them.

Quick Tips for Students:

1. Be sure to offer evidence that is sufficient for proving your point, information that is relevant to the issue at hand. Depending on how complex or controversial your claim is, you may need to offer more data if the claim is difficult to prove or less if your audience would be easily convinced.
2. Always question the reliability of your sources because some may be misleading in the way they present themselves. Look for other

sources who use your authorities' information instead of assuming the source is reliable. Since not all sources are reliable, it is up to you as the writer and researcher to determine the credibility and authority of your sources.

3. Balance information gleaned from sources with your own statement of factual information. Avoid reliance on the sources to make your argument for you; instead, offer inferences based on your interpretation and understanding of the facts.

## **Cause/Effect Writing**

Oftentimes we find ourselves in a situation, wondering how we got there, why certain events have happened, or what the results of our own actions will be. These are situations where we examine issues of cause and effect. We consider whose actions were responsible for the situation, why the person or group acted as they did, and what consequences result from those actions. In a similar respect, when writing a cause and effect essay, we are working to determine and explain reasons for behaviors, actions, or beliefs and the consequences of situations that arise because of those behaviors, actions, or beliefs.

When searching for reasons why something happened or why a situation exists, we usually find a variety of causes that are interconnected, albeit by a remote connection at times. Our purpose when writing a cause/effect essay, then, is to unravel the mystery of the causal relationship between events or happenings first for ourselves, and then for our audience. We write to explain what did or might occur, and why. Because it is not likely that a situation is the result of only a few causes—nor will there be only a few people affected by a situation or decision that is worthy of our writing—we must be sure to narrow our focus so that our subject is manageable based on the assignment's requirements. A cause/effect essay must thoroughly and reasonably discuss each cause and explain the logical

connection between those causes in order to illustrate their effects on a certain person or group. Similarly, since one particular action (cause) may result in effects on any number of people in a number of ways, we need to narrow our subject for our writing to a few effects, while still recognizing the ongoing possibilities for other consequences. Any time we find a number of apparent causes or effects, then, we should weigh them against one another and assign each a level of importance so that when we write, we may choose the most closely related causes and effects and create a thesis statement that clearly explains to our audience the connection between the most relevant causes and effects.

Another way to keep your essay focused is to consider who would and who would not agree with you; then, consider why. If there is widespread disagreement over causes or effects, you might need to go a bit further in your examination of causes and effects in order to be clear and accurate in your interpretation of the situation while also treating others' opinions fairly. Once you have determined whom your audience is and on what level they will agree with you, develop your subject by describing the event or situation for which you are explaining causes and effects, offering information on who is responsible for the situation and why, what beliefs they hold, what types of decisions they have made to cause the situation, when these decisions occurred, and where those people who are affected can be found. Organize your information into paragraphs by setting a goal for each paragraph:



answer one question per paragraph, and order your paragraphs to offer cause(s) before effect(s).

#### Quick Tips for Students:

1. Beware of confusing coincidence with cause. There always needs to be a logical, explainable relationship between your causes and effects, and you'll need to be able to discuss that relationship in your essay.
2. Do not oversimplify causes by failing to recognize their full number and complexity. Show in your writing that you recognize that the causes you are outlining there are not the only ones although they are the most important to your argument or your point of view.
3. Do not assume that because one thing preceded another, they are directly or causally related. Cause and effect depends not only on a timeline of when things happened, but also on how and why those actions are related.

## Sleep Deprivation in Teenagers -- Prize Winner

*The writer builds a convincing and thorough case that sleep deprivation is especially serious and widespread amongst teenagers. The sense of urgency starts in the introduction, which creates suspense by not immediately announcing the topic. Noteworthy in this essay are the smooth flow of ideas from one point to the next and the structuring of the paragraphs so that each deals with one cause and then its effect. Though the sentence structures do not vary much and the language is unadorned, clarity and conciseness are virtues of the straightforward diction.*

Sandra D. Masters

Bobbie Kilbane

Composition 1010

6 April 2010

## Sleep Deprivation in Teenagers

There is an epidemic that is sweeping through our nation.

Television news programs and talk shows attempt to educate the victims, while magazines and newspapers dedicate an enormous amount of space to this topic. Drug companies conduct around-the-clock research in an attempt to discover the magic cure, and doctors' waiting rooms are filled with patients whose root problem can be traced directly to this epidemic. Sufferers may be young, old, rich, poor, male, or female. The infection threatens the health and welfare of so many citizens. The contamination is sleep, or the lack of sleep. Teenagers are especially being affected by sleep

deprivation, or the lack of enough sleep. Teenagers are experiencing an overall decline in their physical and mental well-being because of the rapidly growing practice of cutting back on sleep to make room for other activities in their schedules.

Sleep deprivation occurs when teens continually get fewer hours of sleep per night than their bodies need to be healthy. According to the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, teenagers should sleep nine hours per night to facilitate their body for working their best. Many teens are getting much less than those nine precious hours of sleep. Researchers have found that many are receiving six and half hours or even less a night ("Poor"). This trend is causing numerous health issues. Teenagers' bodies are experiencing hormonal and physical changes as well as making emotional and social changes. The simple tasks of everyday life can begin to impose crushing pressure that can cause a variety of problems. A 2005 study points out approximately a quarter to over half of adolescents experience some level of sleep deprivation:

A panel of researchers declares between 15% and 30% of all adolescents may have some type of sleep problem at some point during childhood, whereas some argue between 33% and 75% of all adolescents have some type of sleep problem. (Dawson 43)

What is the cause of this lack of sleep in teens? For many, overbooked schedules are the reason. Teens fill their day with school, after-school clubs and activities, sports, working, homework, and socializing with friends, not to mention the added time needed for meals and family, along with other assorted necessities. In today's fast paced, do-it-all, be-all-you-can-be world, it often seems that there is simply not enough time available in the day to accomplish all of the required objectives. This can cause physical, mental, and emotional stress. A set of researchers found in their study that teens without the adequate amount of sleep were more likely to be stressed (Noland et al. 224). Many teens make the decision to sacrifice sleep in order to complete other items on their agenda.

Why do teens feel they must function within these busy schedules if they are to be effective and successful individuals? Many are forced to perform this way with no end in sight. Parents with overly high expectations are the source of much of the pressure. Parents are legendary for putting excessive demands on their teens to do more without taking into consideration the stress and harm they may be putting on them. Insufficient sleep can be quite harmful. If the body is not properly rested, it cannot function in its top shape. A chronic lack of sleep commonly results in negative effects on their ability to focus and concentrate in school as well as behavior and mood problems, in addition to increased risk of injuries and accidents and the development of caffeine or other stimulant addictions.

The biggest problem that insufficient sleep has on this age group is their performance in school. The insufficient sleep causes students to be drowsy and in a haze during school hours and unable to focus or concentrate. They have difficulty staying awake throughout the day. They struggle with the ability to think clearly and exercise good judgment. A majority of tired teens have a higher tendency to be tardy. Their grades typically start to suffer and decline. They have trouble controlling their behavior. They are short-tempered and irritable to fellow classmates and teachers (Bridgemohan and Esherick 62-72).

Secondly, numerous of teenagers work part-time jobs, but for many, these jobs are potential dangers. When a teen is lacking the adequate amount of sleep, he or she is more prone to an accident and more likely to make a bad decision. Teens are putting themselves and others at a heightened risk of getting hurt. Researchers at the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health claim about 231,000 workers under the age of eighteen are injured on the job each year with sixty to seventy of them dying from workplace accidents (Bridgemohan and Esherick 68). More and more teens are having accidents at the workplace; unfortunately, that is not the only place accidents or injuries are occurring: driving, skateboard parks, sporting events, and weight rooms are potential places for the risk of accidents. According to Dr. Carl Hunt, "A tired child is an accident waiting to happen" (qtd in Bridgemohan and Esherick 68).

Finally, for a lot of these teens to maintain the energy needed, they will resort to a caffeinated beverage to obtain the energy boost it provides, with hopes to increase their alertness. For so many teens, a typical day starts with a cup of coffee in the morning, and throughout the day it is a consumption of soda after soda or energy drink after energy drink. This high consumption of caffeine can lead to addiction. However, what some do not take into account is that wonderful rush of energy they are feeling from the caffeine is actually contributing to their sleepiness by keeping them up and preventing them from receiving the sleep they need to feel rested. Even as teens are suffering from the uncontrollable need for caffeine, it does not stop there.

They may be still starving for something more, which makes them resort to a much stronger method or boost, prescription stimulants. Stimulant abuse is on the rise; for example, one expert reported the abuse of prescription stimulants almost doubled between 1993 and 2005 (Shute). The major problem with the prescription drugs is the easy access since they can often be obtained from the family medicine cabinet. The prescription drugs Adderall and Ritalin, prescribed for attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, are among the most abused by teens because of the easy access. Teens are drawn to these two drugs for assistance in staying awake and increasing their energy in order to accomplish everything on their overbooked schedules. But the ultimate reality is that these teens are

becoming dependent on these energy boosts, and repeated overuse is leading so many to addiction that cannot be defeated without help.

So many of these teens are over-worked and many are suffering from sleep deprivation. Sleep deprivation is a rapidly growing problem with no relief in sight. Teens need to understand that not getting enough sleep can be harmful and have a huge impact on them physically and mentally. Therefore, teens' parents should be made aware of this problem and learn how to assist their teenage children to get enough sleep. Sleep is important for everyone, particularly teens, who are growing and developing physically and mentally into adults.

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## Beauty or Something Like It

*In the opening sentences, the writer hooks readers with a vividly described scenario: we are asked to imagine losing a beauty pageant in which we are found "worthless, unable to capture the essence of beauty the judges were looking for." Throughout the paper, the writer displays an unflagging concern for what women could suffer as a result of unrealistic societal standards for beauty. In presenting the problem and its causes, however, the essay does not rely solely on compelling language to bolster claims. We find expert testimony and statistics to support assertions. Although the paper takes a strong position on the issue, the thesis could have provided a more specific statement of the essay's goals and scope.*

Katie Spears

Professor Byrnes

English 1010

3 December 2009

## Beauty or Something Like It

Let's take a journey into a whole new experience. Imagine walking up on a stage, and the lights are glistening; your heart begins to beat faster and faster. The whole wide world is watching, judging. The announcer says, "Third runner up . . . second runner up . . . first runner up and the winner of this year's pageant is . . ." Your name isn't called. You're left standing, feeling worthless, unable to capture the essence of beauty the judges were looking for. American culture has changed the true meaning of beauty into

something that is absolutely hideous; however, true beauty is having the confidence and ambition to impact the world and those in it.

Women, especially young women, feel pressure to be what television ads, movies, and sitcoms depict as being beautiful. More often than not, these young women do not understand the true meaning of beauty. Therefore, television leaves them with the images of New York runway models and Hollywood actresses, who broadcast an unrealistic picture of how to be beautiful. This causes these young girls to find fault with themselves and compare themselves to the plastic surgery celebrities who label themselves as being beautiful. However, being beautiful is not defined by how much money you spend on clothes, houses, or even a nose job. Loving people daily and showing them that they have a purpose in their lives is absolutely beautiful. The women who think of others before themselves and can walk out of their home with curlers in their hair and still believe in themselves are truly the definition of beauty. Unfortunately, the pressure of being beautiful is not only controlled by the click of a power button on a television remote.

Often friends cause the most pressure on young girls. Friends are the true reflection of ourselves, whether they are a positive or negative influence. Women constantly compare themselves to each other, either consciously or subconsciously. Most girls are in constant competition for love

interests, boyfriends, and even husbands. Women desire to be pursued; most get butterflies in their stomachs and can't help but giggle when a cute boy smiles at them. Women need to feel as though they are worthy to be pursued, only now they find there is a standard they must meet before they are worthy of being loved. This beauty ideal that most women have is nearly impossible to attain. Debra L. Gimlin's study finds, "Many women focus enormous energy on molding their bodies into the closest possible approximations of the female ideal. As they do so, they encounter representatives of commercialized beauty industries who help shape both their appearances and their relationship to those appearances" (16). The people we surround ourselves with and their attitudes shape beauty into something that is unreachable for most women, making them feel as if they are not deserving of being happy or being loved.

Unhealthy decisions often result in an obsession with being what society calls beautiful. A series of recent studies has found that no one knows where the idea of being thin came from or why it is so prominent in today's society (Bordo 46). Culture has distorted the image of beauty so much that young women feel the need to make themselves sick in order to obtain it. Obviously, this is a cry for reform in modern America's view of what is beautiful. These girls hurt themselves, preventing their bodies from developing into a normal woman's shape. Hips, breasts, and the curve of their waists are how women's bodies were designed. Women were not made

to be stick figures. Our shapely, curvy bodies serve a purpose. According to Susan Bordo, there are many subconscious and unlovable attributes and uncertainties that cause these attention-starved girls to encounter a certain type of disorder:

A dramatic example is the case of BIDS, or Body Image Distortion Syndrome, first described by Hilde Brunch as 'disturbance in size awareness,'(19) and for a long time seen as one of the hallmarks of anorexia nervosa, both in the popular imagination and in the diagnostic criteria. In both contexts, BIDS has functioned to emphasize a discontinuity between anorexia and 'normal' attitudes toward weight and body image. In the clinical literature, the initial theorizing of BIDS as a Viso-Spatial problem, a perceptual defect, firmly placed anorexia within the medical, mechanistic model of illness (and a positive conception of perception as well). A person had a defect (sometimes conceived as the result of impaired brain-function; sometimes as by Brunch, as part of a more general pattern of defective processing of body experiences due to inadequate infant development) was unable to see her body 'realistically.' In more popular renditions, the "bizarre" and mysterious nature of the symptom was emphasized; such descriptions were often accompanied by line drawings of the anorectic standing in front of the mirror that reflected back to her grossly inflated and disturbed image. (Bordo 55)

Young women are pressured daily by American society. They feel the need to be accepted so badly that they starve themselves in order to measure up to the unattainable picture culture has for women. These sick girls sometimes never recover, and they sell themselves short by ending their lives. It's time to change this misconstrued idea of beauty and put the sparkle back into those young girls' eyes. Beauty is the love for humanity and showing a truly beautiful soul to the world.

The assumption these young women make is that outward beauty will earn some sort of respect, but that thought is completely ridiculous. True beauty earns respect because the whole world sees these young women's personality and intellect. Sarah Banet-Weiser, an author formerly involved in beauty pageants, wrote in one of her books, "A 'proper' image of a beautiful woman was newly considered a symbol of 'national pride, power, and modernity'" (35). Banet-Weiser understands that true beauty of a woman lies within her character and in her ambition to change the world for the better. However, young women still feel the pressure to be perfect in every single way, which often leads to chronic illnesses, depression, and even death.

Culture impacts our lives; shouldn't we impact our culture? It's time to stand and show the world the meaning of true beauty. Susan Bordo believes that "we may be producing a generation of young, privileged women with

severely impaired menstrual, nutritional and intellectual functioning" (61). True beauty is not what the media portrays, nor is it about competition between friends. It is, however, a personal journey of defining who one is in a world where beauty is defined as something morbid. America's view of beauty is causing girls to make themselves sick, which affects them in such a way that they are spiritually and physically incapable of living a healthy life. Make a change for the better, have self confidence, and change the world. Indeed, the true definition of beauty is having confidence and ambition to change the world.

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## Creating Chaos: Why Terrorism Happens

*Dealing with subject matter that is emotionally and politically charged, the writer adopts an objective stance and a restrained tone in explaining the causes of terrorism. Another strength of this essay lies in its organization. No rule exists about how much an essay's "scaffolding" should be visible; in this case, it borders on becoming obtrusive. Nonetheless, the following all help the reader easily navigate this essay: the thesis previewing main points, the logical ordering of those points in the body, the clear focus of each paragraph, and the transitional phrases in the topic sentences. The only flaw in this essay is that the works cited entries lack information and are incomplete, thus preventing the reader from locating sources easily.*

Ian Broderick

Cynthia Chanin

English 1010

30 September 2009

## Creating Chaos: Why Terrorism Happens

In the modern world, terrorism is a part of everyday life and, therefore, must be understood. Although terrorism is nothing new, the wanton destruction of innocents and civilians is a terrifying new development. In some areas, terrorist attacks occur almost every day, leaving massive casualties and devastation in the wake of this senseless violence. This reckless destruction must be understood in order to recover



from previous attacks and prepare for and prevent future assaults. People turn to terrorism because of mental instability, a desire to change what they believe is wrong with the world, and a longing to have a cause that is bigger than they are.

First of all, people turn to terrorist organizations and acts because of mental instability. Many psychologists have tried to draw up a "fixed and unambiguous 'terrorist profile'" (Crenshaw 407). Although no profile is perfect, most of these psychologists find a strong correlation between known terrorists and personality disorders, especially narcissistic personality disorders and paranoid disorders (Crenshaw 407). Obviously, these mental troubles give the terrorist an inflated ego and an extreme distrust of authority, a lethal combination. Disconcertingly, multiple people with different types of psychological disturbances are working together in order to achieve the most damaging attacks they can. It is of the utmost importance to understand the psychological problems that afflict these terrorists so that they may be stopped from committing heinous acts and helped with their own problems.

Secondly, people become terrorists because of a desire to change a perceived wrong. After years of observing this "wrong" negatively affect them and their culture, the terrorists take matters into their own hands and lash out at their "oppressors." For instance, in Middle Eastern countries, a

"time-honored tradition of blaming foreigners" has caused many citizens to pin everything negative that happens on another country or race, leading to a desire to have that particular country, or race annihilated, by any means necessary (Levine 2). Typically, terrorists are raised and indoctrinated with sets of ideals that directly contradict what is commonly practiced in the world, causing a deep-seated resentment. This leads to a hatred of those who believe and practice differently, a hatred that is taken out on any who represent this difference. For example, many third world countries have a general feeling of animosity towards advanced countries; since the United States is one of the most powerful of the advanced countries, it is frequently the target of attacks, although the U.S. itself may have never done anything to provoke the radicals. When the desire to change the world is coupled with a will to act violently, horrible things can happen.

Finally, people become terrorists in order to belong to a cause and group that they feel is more important than they are. Often, people who believe strongly in a cause will become suicide bombers as a last resort to change their world, believing that all other options are exhausted and that their suicide is the best thing they can do for their cause (Aggarwall 4). This sense of self-righteousness and importance within their group gives the terrorists a feeling of belonging, as in a family. On terrorists and the groups with which they associate, Della Porta notes this:

. . . the persistence of individual commitment to underground organizations[...] is best explained by intense identification with the group. Commitment is also motivated by ego-involvement. Individuals seek to maintain self-respect, the support of the peer group, and the sense of belonging that is heightened by a sense of shared risk. Della Porta's research shows not only that individual motivations and structural conditions must be analyzed together, but also that the individuals in question possessed well-established political identities and had experienced prior socialization into the use of violence. (Crenshaw 409)

Clearly, terrorists are heavily influenced by their peers, who share the same radical beliefs they do, giving them an excuse to stand behind those beliefs obediently and unflinchingly. Many have correctly stated that "terrorism is a social phenomenon" (Aggarwall 3) and must be regarded as such. What is so terrifying about terrorism is not the individual's actions, but the fact that groups of people work together to cause immeasurable havoc and chaos to a system. Terrorism's social aspects are some of the most frightening when the thought of multiple people cooperating to destroy is taken into account.

People turn to terrorist acts because of mental problems, a desire to change the world for their purposes, and a longing to have a cause to stand behind. Terrorism is a common, if terrifying, part of life in the twenty-first century and will probably only become more widespread through the coming years. A greater comprehension of why these people become terrorists and

why they attack innocents is necessary to both understand and prevent future assaults on society.

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**Section III: Research Essays Based on Five or More  
Sources**

## **Writing Claims of Policy**

Claims of policy make recommendations. These recommendations call for a specific solution to a specific problem. Because students must establish that a problem exists or will exist before making recommendations or discuss causes and effects of a problem first, this writing assignment may be assigned later in English 1020 since students will need to understand how to establish a claim of fact, cause, or value first.

Currently in the VSCC English Department, English 1020 instructors may have students focus on a single issue about which they feel passionate such as “creating a living working wage for workers,” “providing affordable health care for all Americans,” or “establishing a daycare on VSCC’s college campus for students with childcare needs.” English instructors may ask students to build shorter argumentative essays—a claim of fact, a claim of value, a claim of cause—to establish a problem, and the student will end the course by writing a longer argumentative essay, a claim of policy that offers solutions to the problem. Some instructors may begin the course with an I-Search paper that allows students to explore their interests as they begin to shape their research for a claim of policy. However, other VSCC English 1020 teachers take an opposite approach, asking students to write shorter claims of fact, definition, value, cause, and policy covering a variety of

topics—one topic for each claim type. All of these methods can yield strong claims of policy. In the following included claims of policy, we see differing cases.

Students can write successful claims of policy by clearly establishing a specific problem, discussing the problem’s causes or effects, offering an evaluation of the problem, and providing a solution to the problem. As is the case in writing successful arguments, the claim of policy should also provide a clearly focused persuasive thesis that identifies the problem and solution, well-supported reasons backed by relevant and sufficient evidence, a counter-argument, and an appeal to an audience’s pathos, logos, and ethos.

#### Quick Tips for Students:

1. Note that policy claims are recognizable because they tend to use the words “should” and “should not,” but students need to also recognize when the words are implied. For example, “Support Our Troops” is a declarative bumper sticker that is a policy claim because the understood larger statement is, “We should support our troops.”
2. Writers of policy claims often have problems coming up with specific solutions for the problem, and many times, it is because those writers have failed to narrow their audience to a specific group of people. Consider your options when it comes to audience; in other words,



determine who will be responsible for carrying out the actions you propose in your solution and what level of responsibility you are assigning to each group of people in that audience.

3. Don't forget to familiarize yourself with as many options as possible before suggesting a plan of action. Also consider research on solutions that have been implemented and how and why they have been unsuccessful in other places. This knowledge will help you improve your counterargument.

## Educating America's Gifted Children - Prize Winner

*This researched claim of cause essay draws on the writings of experts to support her claim that the No Child Left Behind Act, passed in 2002, has caused public schools to largely ignore our gifted students in their struggle to raise the performances of low-achievers in their populations. Using a blend of paraphrased information and quotations from expert sources, cited MLA style, the writer depicts the "freefall in the quality of American education" and the problem of high school drop-outs. Citing statistics, professional analysis and educational theory, the writer compares our system with foreign countries like Japan and China where teachers and education are held in much higher esteem than here. The writer concludes with a policy claim that all Americans "must be held accountable" for the failure of the American educational performance. The essay is very well-organized, rich with support for the writer's ideas, and adequately presents many sides of this controversial topic.*

Pam Loy

English 1020

Cynthia Wyatt

Claim of Policy Final Draft

### Educating America's Gifted Children:

#### Are We Wasting One of Our Most Valuable Resources?

American children are falling behind the world academically, an ongoing trend that has been recognized since Sputnik was launched into space in 1957. Of even greater concern, it has become increasingly clear that we may be wasting the talents of our best and brightest students, our highest achievers, with instructional methods that emphasize success on standardized tests required by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), enacted

by President George Bush in 2002. Can we afford to waste this great talent and still remain competitive with the rest of the world? Have gifted children suffered as a result of NCLB? Many believe this is the case.

First, a few basic facts about the No Child Left Behind Act: from the beginning, NCLB has been one of the nation's most controversial education reforms and is actually a revision of an earlier act called ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965) that provided federal aid to schools with high numbers of low income students. It focuses primarily on low-achieving children—those who need the most help learning, and it was one of the first educational acts to tie funding to achievement. After thorough discussion and debate of all aspects of the Act, teacher quality also became a primary focus. NCLB sets goals of minimum criteria for teachers in schools receiving funds, but this goal was not met by 2005, so in 2007 an additional \$2.9 billion was budgeted to improve teacher excellence (Fisanick 7-8).

There are questions, however, as to whether the NCLB qualifications guarantee teacher excellence, and the Commission on NCLB, after conducting a large scale study of the program's effectiveness, concluded that they do not. According to the Commission's report, "It is time to ensure that all teachers demonstrate their effectiveness in the classroom rather than just their qualifications for entering it." (9) Throughout much of the ongoing debate of how to measure teacher effectiveness, there is general agreement that qualifications do not guarantee quality and that a more comprehensive

measurement of teaching quality is a necessary component in the improvement of American education.

Several factors are contributing to the decline in the educational success of American children. According to education researcher Krista Kafer, author of "Education Statistics," American students placed 19<sup>th</sup> out of 21 countries in math and science (from the TIMSS 1995 study). In an article titled "High Stakes Testing Has a Negative Impact on Learning," authors David Berliner and Sharon Nichols" attribute Americans' lagging rankings to the No Child Left Behind Act. They believe the focus on test preparation has pre-empted authentic teaching and learning. (45) Further, Berliner and Nichols contend that test emphasis has resulted in corrupt practices to "make the scores" and achieve Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

Administrators, staff and teachers, with their jobs at stake, have resorted to dishonest means of administering tests and reporting scores. Far too much pressure is put on children to do well on the tests. Sadder still, teachers have come to view the low achieving child as a liability instead of a challenge.(48) As stated by Berliner and Nichols, "We are turning America into a nation of test takers, abandoning our heritage as a nation of thinkers, dreamers, and doers." (49) In the end, the primary focus is put on the kids who are referred to as the "bubble kids," those who, with help, can be brought up to the competency level required by the assessment tests. High achievers are ignored because they can be counted on to score well without

assistance. In many cases, they are put to work tutoring and coaching the "bubble kids." Low achievers are largely ignored—the teachers simply haven't the time to give them the extra help they need.

NCLB proponents argue that the achievement gap in American elementary and middle schools appears to be closing among ethnic and socioeconomic groups. Math scores for nine and thirteen-year-olds are at all-time highs. Students in the nine-to-thirteen-year-old range are reading more. (The Nation's Report Card) Critics such as Monty Neill, executive director of FairTest: the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, counter that improvements are a result of intensified instruction in targeted areas, and that gains are merely a result of rote-learning, not conceptual understanding or problem-solving (Fisanick, 22). This may explain the drop-off in scores at higher grade levels, where virtually no improvement has been noted; and in some subject areas, there is actually a decline. An even greater concern is the high incidence of marginal illiteracy exhibited by many high school graduates.

So where do our legislators stand in terms of NCLB? In a letter to the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pension Committee, ten U.S. Senators outline grave concerns regarding NCLB (Fisanick 10), such as decreased funding for gifted and talented programs as a result of funds previously allocated to these programs being diverted to concentrate on students not

likely to meet NCLB baseline requirements (Berger, 9). According to P.H. DeLeone, the U.S. Office of Education reports that 40% of the students in the top 5% of high school graduating classes are not graduating from college (qtd. in Rimm 3). Dr. Sylvia Rimm, a researcher of gifted education, says studies show that between 10 and 20 percent of high school drop-outs are intellectually superior (3). Can we afford to concede all these great minds to the ranks of the unemployed or underemployed?

The website National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent uncovers a central problem in American society. The article, entitled "America's Ambivalence Toward the Intellect," explores America's conflicting tendency to distrust those with superior intellectual tendencies, yet proudly trumpeting that individuals should "be all that they can be." We value exceptional talent when it is expressed as some brilliant new invention or produces tangible results that benefit us, yet we are not inclined to support development of those with that superior intellectual potential. There is significant peer pressure to avoid academic excellence, and bright students feel compelled to underachieve to avoid being ostracized. As educators, we set a standard of average academic competency and wonder why many of our students fail to achieve the level of excellence seen in other developed countries. Perhaps we need to raise the bar. If we demand more and expect more, we will achieve more, both as individuals, and as a nation.

The organization Child Trends Data Bank agrees that one of the most critical problems in American education continues to be the high school dropout rate. In an article on their website entitled "High School Drop Outs," they report that, though the dropout rates for young people ages 16-24 . . . gradually declined from 15 percent to a low of 9 percent between 1972 and 2005, the numbers are still unacceptable. Dropouts lack the skills necessary to compete in today's highly competitive and technologically advanced workplace. They are more likely to be unemployed, receive government assistance, and live in poverty; therefore, perhaps we could save in the end by investing in their early education.

So what causes nearly ten percent of children to quit school? There are likely many reasons, but among others, educators most commonly cite the following:

- Children being advanced when they are not prepared
- Gifted kids lack challenge, get bored, and give up on school
- Slower learners get frustrated at being so far behind their peers, lack an understanding of the material and get the feeling they'll never be able to catch up
- Social problems at school or at home

So how do we contain the freefall in the quality of American education? It will take an entire community. We need to place a high value on

excellence in education. We need to participate as parents, educators, policymakers, and administrators to bring our educational standards up to the level of leading countries such as China, Japan, and Korea, where education is valued above nearly all else. Parental involvement is key—we must develop and support higher expectations for the education of our children. We must show our children that we value education highly, and we must support our teachers in their efforts to excel (Stevenson 216-223).

I believe we should abolish NCLB as it currently exists. We must develop new methods of evaluating teacher quality and effectiveness. We should make teaching more lucrative and expand programs to reward college and graduate students seeking teaching degrees so that we can attract the best and brightest to educate our children. Teaching must be a valued, respected, and sought-after occupation, as it is in Japan, where there are five applicants for every available position, and where teachers' salaries are 2.4 times the national per capita income, compared to 1.7 times the U.S. per capita income. (Stevenson 162). Teaching should be lucrative at all levels. Interestingly, in Japan, elementary school teachers are as highly respected as university professors. The Japanese recognize the importance of a strong, early foundation, and reward their teachers for providing it.



I also believe we should maintain accountability, but give teachers more latitude about how tests are administered, when to hold students back, and how to assess reading and writing skills. Students who lack basic, remedial reading and writing skills should be given extra instruction until they achieve competence and not just be passed along to worry the next teacher with federal funding penalties for failing students. This common practice has become more prevalent since NCLB and has a devastating effect on those children who fall victim to it. On the other hand, those who excel must be given the opportunity to advance their skills in a challenging environment that allows them to achieve their potential.

Every bright, high-achieving student in America should have access to a gifted or magnet school with highly qualified teachers who can help identify and develop their talents and abilities. These kids represent our future. They are the ones we will turn to as we struggle to find answers to such dilemmas as global warming; renewable resources; affordable, effectual health care; financial stability; effective education; and world hunger. As part of a lengthy list of reasons for gifted education, the National Association of Gifted Children states the following:

Providing for our finest minds allows both individual and societal needs to be met. Contributions to society in all areas of human endeavor come in over-weighted proportions from this population of individuals.

Society needs the gifted adult to play a far more demanding and innovative role than that required of the more typical learner. We need integrated, highly functioning persons that will lead all of us to a satisfying, and fulfilling future. (DeLisle & Galbraith, 90-91)

We can't afford to waste this talent, and the opportunity shouldn't be limited to those students whose communities have recognized the need for such a school or to those whose parents can afford a lucrative, private school. Education researchers Jim DeLisle and Judy Galbraith clarify the problem, explaining, "We agree that no child should be left behind. We also believe that no child should be *kept behind* because his or her learning needs aren't being met" (83). Americans must also ensure that a good college education is an achievable, affordable option for every student in America willing to put forth the effort to obtain that education.

By the same token, children who are struggling should never be pushed through the system because administrators are afraid of losing federal funding dollars. Problems must be identified and addressed and every child given the opportunity to achieve basic competency, especially in reading, writing, and math. By "fast-tracking" children, we are condemning them to a life of low achievement, wasting their abilities, and setting them up for failure. Many of these kids, given the proper time, attention, and guidance, will achieve competency and go on to become valuable,

contributing members of our society. We must guarantee they have that chance.

One of the keys to success of an education overhaul in America lies with the parents. Parents *must* be actively involved with the education of their children in order for them to achieve their potential. Schools are not babysitting services, and they are not responsible for raising our children. Responsibility begins at home. Parents need to advocate for their children and assist teachers and administrators wherever possible. We must bring education into the home as something of high value from the time children are very small. Parents should read to their children early and often. Books should be an integral part of every child's upbringing. Research shows that parents are the biggest factor in their children's educational success. In an on-line article entitled "Ten Easy Ways to Help Your Child's School," the website Greatschools.net references studies that show parents who volunteer at their child's school are more likely to have successful kids. I have witnessed this first-hand and can attest that schools with an active, involved group of parents have more resources (from parent fund raising), happier teachers and staff, and more successful children. Kids who know their parents are interested and concerned and invested in their education respond by increased effort and pride in their school and their studies. They enjoy school, see the tremendous benefits inherent in a good education, and are more successful in their efforts.

As a society, we must learn to value intellect and education as a driving force in our future success. Mediocrity should never be acceptable, and certainly not rewarded. Our children must be afforded every opportunity to achieve success, no matter their background, economic status, or IQ. And college must be an attainable goal for any child who chooses to pursue the opportunity.

What else can we do, as concerned parents, teachers, and American citizens? We need to badger our policy makers into fixing the problems inherent in our educational system, and refuse to let "average" be good enough. We need to hold our representatives accountable for the millions of taxpayer dollars that are funneled into an educational system that is adequately mediocre, at best, and shockingly bad, at worst. There is apparently no shortage of money. " . . . Funding for the U.S. Department of Education has increased by 150% from \$23 billion in fiscal year 1996 to nearly \$58 billion in fiscal year 2006" (Fisanick 11). But we need to ensure that our dollars are being responsibly spent in a manner that will achieve maximum results for our children.

As many proponents of NCLB have argued, accountability is critical. But we must *all* be accountable, not just our teachers and school administrators, and not just for test scores. All of us—educators, administrators, legislators, community leaders, parents, and children—must

be held accountable. We cannot continue to lose ground to the rest of the developed world. As world leaders, we must strive for the highest education standards in the world. Our future depends on it.

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## America's Processed Diet is Worth the Weight

*This researched claim of cause essay is a thorough analysis of the effect of processed foods on rising obesity rates in this country and on American health in general. Using a blend of paraphrased information and quotations, cited MLA style, the writer establishes the background of obesity rates in the past and present, drawing the conclusion that the problem is on the rise and processed food is the culprit. Nutritionists, food-industry spokespeople, chef Jamie Oliver and food-writer Michael Pollan are cited to support the conclusion that the public must be educated about nutrition and health so that the next generation will not face the same problems with obesity and related diseases. Good organization and a wealth of well-utilized data from trustworthy sources make this an eye-opening essay about our nation's health crisis.*

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## America's Processed Diet is Worth the Weight

Many Americans are obese and pass on their eating habits to the next generation. Many obese people eat an unhealthy diet of processed foods that are overwhelmingly abundant in today's society. Unfortunately, people still chose to eat processed foods instead of the healthier alternative of whole foods. When I went on a twenty-eight day detoxification diet, I could not eat any processed foods. During the first few days of the diet, I experienced withdrawal symptoms; however, I soon felt more energetic and no longer craved the processed foods. My experience has taught me that people can



survive without processed foods. Due to the fact that our diet is mainly processed foods, obesity has become a big problem in America, and these foods are affecting more than weight but also health as well.

Obesity in Americans is increasing at an alarming rate. According to the United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention, "Between the mid-1970s and the mid-2000s, the percentage of overweight and obese American adults aged 20-74 years increased from 15.0% to 32.9%" (Carson-DeWitt et al, par. 6). This trend not only affects adults, but children as well. The National Institute of Health claims that childhood obesity is an increasing issue seeing as it is now three times the rate since 1980 (United States par. 12). These children may find it difficult to maintain a healthier weight as they grow older due to the increased number of fat cells. Many chronic illnesses will arise from obesity that these children will encounter as they grow older. Currently, many adults deal with not only the disease, but the cost to treat the disease. Jeffery Levi, executive director of Trust for America's Health states, "Obesity is one of the biggest contributors to chronic diseases, which is one of the biggest drivers of healthcare" (qtd. in United States par 4). Diet can affect the amount of exercise one does which can directly affect a person's weight. Diets high in sugar can actually make people feel more tired and less likely to exercise. Obesity is caused by many things, and some people do not realize the error of their choices.

Obesity in America can be linked to misinformation. Many people are unaware of the proper foods and serving sizes to eat. The food pyramid was designed to help people make healthy choices, but it is more confusing than helpful. After thirteen years, the outdated food pyramid was replaced with a newer version. In his article, "Government Dietary Guidelines Are Political, Not Scientific," Walter C. Willet, MD, chair of the Department of Nutrition at Harvard School of Health, argues that "the new pyramid doesn't display any real facts and the foods that are shown are not always necessary" (27). The process of revising the new pyramid is unclear to many people. A group of nutritional experts did the research, but their findings were not published. Willet explains this fact best when he writes, "When it (finally) came time to 'fix' the Pyramid, lobbying and politics took center stage, while science and the health of the American people took a back seat" (28). The food pyramid is many people's guideline to a healthy diet, but it cannot be completely trusted. In the United States, the food pyramid is more than just a guideline that can be ignored. Since many of the federal food programs or school menus are governed by these guidelines, some people do not have a choice. When it comes to how we eat, Ron Achterkirch, the primary owner of the International Chefs Culinary Center, reasons, "We all have to put food in our mouth. Eating right is important" (qtd. in Ong, par 7). The processed foods Americans eat are a big contributor to the obesity problem.

Most food readily available to Americans is processed and high in fat. Moreover, these types of foods such as potato chips, french fries, canned foods, and many others are also high in salt and calories. The amount of salt in processed foods can build up in the kidneys and bring about an increase in blood pressure. Compared to their natural counterparts, the calories in processed foods are not filling, causing people to eat more. However, low fat processed food alternatives are sometimes less healthy because sweeteners or preservatives are usually added. Moreover, these types of foods lack the nutrients people need every day. Michael Pollan, a Knight Professor of Journalism at UC Berkley, in his book In Defense of Food, writes, " 'Taste great, less filling' could be the motto for most processed foods [...] they contain much less water, fiber, and micronutrients, and generally much more sugar and fat, making them at the same time, to coin a marketing slogan, 'More fattening, less nutritious!'" (150). Type 2 diabetes and a number of other chronic diseases have become prevalent in the United States due to large amounts of sugar consumption. In the article "Obesity," the authors state that studies show the total amount of fat in a person's diet could have a larger effect on weight than the amount of calories it has (Carson-DeWitt et al par. 8). Furthermore, processed foods cause heart attacks which claim many unsuspecting victims. Pollan proposes that Americans appear to be progressing in the way of a "prudent diet" and nevertheless, paradoxically, having increasing numbers of heart attacks, not

fewer (47). Some of the ingredients of these foods have even been linked to cancer and infertility. Processed foods have been proven to have a negative effect on people's health, yet manufacturers do not remove these harmful ingredients. These foods are advertised to be healthy because they have been fortified with vitamins, minerals, fiber, omega-3, or no trans fats.

Processed foods are popular due to their convenience and taste, not nutritional value. Since many parents work extra hours, eating pre-cooked food can be enticing. Lisa Leonida, a single mother with three children, reveals it was an ordinary thing to serve premade food because it was quick and "cheap" (Ong par 9). On the other hand, parents with the time to cook often choose not to because they can buy food already made. Regrettably, these foods lose their nutritional value when they are cleaned or cooked. Jamie Oliver, a professional chef and star of many cooking shows, states, "A lot of [salad greens] are washed in chlorine, so they lose their nutrition; it takes no time to get lettuce and spin it about" (qtd in Witchel par 18). Many people used to cook meals from scratch, but now cooking is considered baking frozen lasagna. The food industry is always trying to make food more convenient rather than healthier, and convenience will usually be chosen over healthier versions of foods. Moreover, people will let the companies do little things for them. For instance, Oliver wonders why the companies need to cut fruit for people who have the power to do so themselves (Witchel par

19). These companies thrive on people's desire to have food prepared for them rather than preparing it themselves.

Many things can be done about the obesity epidemic, and some of the solutions start at home. For instance, people should cook meals at home more often. When cooking at home, people have more control over the types of food are eaten and the portion size. Also, the ingredients used in food preparation can be fresher and healthier than those used in some restaurants, where the concern is more about profit than food quality. For example, the types of oils used can have a huge effect on the nutritional value and fat content. Also, eating at home can help teach children healthier eating habits when they are on their own. According to Tom McCabe, a father of three sons, parents need to explain to their children what to eat and to show restraint (Richardson par.3). Children must be taught what is healthy and what is not, but they will learn more from actions than words. The National Restaurant Association, a group of 945,000 restaurants and food outlets, declares, " [...] the essential role of nutrition education, physical activity, and parental responsibility in childhood nutrition--good eating habits and healthy living habits must be established in the home" (qtd. in Richardson par.8). However, physical exercise is very important when it comes to health; therefore, people who exercise are usually thinner than those who do not. Exercising also helps lower stress levels and can make

people happier. Both a healthy diet and exercise have an effect on a person's weight.

Another solution to the obesity epidemic would be to change the processed food diet. Processed food's negative effects on people need to be stopped. Two entities have the greatest effect on the American diet, food chains and the government. The fast food chains can serve food regardless of the effect on people's health. Although it is up to the individual, food companies should take the customer's health into consideration. Many of the increased portion sizes and the high caloric value of food served by these companies have gotten worse over the years. Jennifer Grossman, Director of Dole Nutrition Institute, in her article "Food for Thought (and for Credit)," writes:

Unsurprisingly, the caloric density of such foods soared relative to those consumed at home. Good value no longer meant taste, presentation, and proper nutrition-but merely more- for-less. Thus, the serving of McDonald's French Fries that contained 200 calories in 1960 contains 610 today. (353)

This should not be acceptable. The fast food chains should cook foods to make them healthier than what they are now. Some foods can be fried in different oils and seasoned in healthier ways; thus, lowering the salt and fat content in the foods. Because sugar is a cause for diabetes and obesity, sugar in drinks and foods needs to be carefully monitored. Also, companies

should, either online or in the menu, state the nutritional value to educate the customers of what they are actually eating. Furthermore, portion sizes should be smaller in the high fat items and increased in the healthier foods.

On the other hand, the government can also do its part by bringing back home economics in schools, supplying better information to the consumer, and holding companies accountable for the products sold. Home economics can help teach kids how to cook for themselves, make good food choices, and many other valuable lessons. Grossman reasons home economics will teach children to make healthier choices for themselves instead of depending upon the food industry to do so (353).

When the government created the food pyramid, it was not created as it should have been. Another pyramid must be created to help people make proper food choices. The government should look out for the consumer. For example, advertising is a huge problem for which many companies are not held accountable. Food companies begin to advertise unhealthy food to children with their favorite cartoon characters. Lisa Bolton, a marketing professor at Wharton University, thinks that aiming advertising at children with favorite characters makes it harder for the parents to decide on health or what their child wants ("Food Fight" par 20). Since children are our future, companies should be more careful about the advertising techniques they use. According to "Food Fight: Obesity Raises Difficult Marketing Technique", "[...] the WHO has since come out advocating that government

discourage ads that promote the consumption of unhealthy food to children (par 29). Although these companies are just doing business, the customer should still be thought of when it comes to food.

Processed foods are a major factor in the obesity problem of Americans; furthermore, obesity contributes to an ever increasing number of chronic illness cases. If Americans continue to consume processed foods, obesity will continue to escalate even more, and more people will be plagued with the illnesses that a healthier diet could help prevent. Regardless, the dietary habits being formed now will affect the next generation.



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## The Cure for the NCLB Act

*This researched claim of policy calling for an overhaul of America's education system traces the history of the No Child Left Behind Act and takes an in-depth look at the problems which have arisen since it was passed in 2002. Drawing substantially on the Thigpen Library databases, Proquest and CQ Researcher, as well as publications from the United States Department of Education, the writer documents the ways in which NCLB has caused schools to lower their standards and alter curriculum. We also learn about the financial burden of the mandate on most states. Good organization and effective use of quotations and paraphrased information from reliable sources, cited MLA style, make this an informative, persuasive piece of writing. The essay ends on a positive note, in a discussion of the Race to the Top initiative that the federal government has recently undertaken to reward individual states for educational reform, which, the writer tells us, has "generated signs of optimism throughout the United States."*

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## The Cure for the NCLB Act

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, aka NCLB, was created and signed by former President, George W. Bush, on January 8, 2002. The law's concept essentially forces state and school districts to close the gap in achievement levels between minority and non-minority students. The NCLB Act focuses on all students in grades K-12; however, these students are divided into subgroups and are tested in math and reading to determine their level of proficiency. Besides "all students," the subgroups include racial

groups, economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and the English Language Learners (North 20A). In order for a specific school, school district, or state to pass the criteria of the NCLB Act, school administrators must show a close in the gap between minority and non-minority children. Moreover, the overall score must also show increased grades for all students. If any subgroup fails to meet the minimum criteria, then the entire school, school district, or state is labeled "in need of improvement." If the schools do meet the minimum criteria, they are considered to have made "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) (Zhang 2). Even though the educational gap is closing in achievement levels among our nation's school districts, the "No Child Left Behind Act" has been costly to our nation with no definitive results, and changes are necessary to re-focus the enhancement of national educational policies.

The problem with NCLB's guidelines is that "nearly twelve percent of the nation's total public schools were identified as needing improvement" (Mantel 8). Since the inception of the NCLB, survey reports indicated "that 73 percent of states and 72 percent of districts said student achievement is improving" (Mantel 5). In addition, "the real problem is that the overall criterion was not sufficient enough to put these schools in an AYP status" (Zhang 5). Particularly, the problem is that achievement scores showed mixed results at the middle and high school level. Achievement gaps became wider, especially in middle schools.

It has become apparent that the NCLB Act is too firm and absolute to determine an effective accountability for achievement. It requires that each state must meet annual benchmarks. For example, in some states, the benchmarks must be that 67.5 percent of a school's total students must meet the minimal proficiency in reading and math. Six years later, 87 percent is required. Ultimately by 2014, 100 percent must be met. If these benchmarks are not met, the schools, school districts, and states are sanctioned by the federal government. These sanctions include that schools are labeled "in need of improvement." Students are then offered the right to transfer, or the schools must offer low income students supplemental services, such as after school tutoring. If these services are unavailable, the state must then restructure the school.

Furthermore, the NCLB Act does not address non-minority students who do not necessarily fall into the subgroups that the Act supports. There is no provision in the Act that recognizes students who excel in their education. According to Mark North, columnist for *The Tennessean*, "No Child Left Behind fails to recognize true excellence in education and even derides some schools as failing that should be lauded as prime examples of scholastic achievement" (20A). Even though these same students are counted in the "all students" category, the criterion fails to allow points to students whose grades are above the national average. This is not to say, however, that the NCLB concept is a total failure. Loyal supporters of the NCLB claim that the

Act is effective in most schools, districts, and states. As the following results indicate:

For America's nine-year-olds in reading, more progress was made in five years than in the previous 28 combined. America's nine-year-olds posted the best scores in reading (since 1971) and math (since 1973) in the history of the report. America's 13-year-olds earned the highest math scores the test ever recorded. Reading and math scores for African American and Hispanic nine-year-olds reached an all-time high. Math scores for African American and Hispanic 13-year-olds reached an all-time high. Achievement gaps in reading and math between white and African American nine-year-olds and between white and Hispanic nine-year-olds are at an all-time low ("The No Child Left Behind Act is Working" 1).

Again, while these scores show that our American children are progressing in both reading and math achievement gaps, these scores are not closing quickly enough to reach the deadline goal of 2014 according to the President's Directive.

Additionally, the Act provides for a National Report Card for all schools, districts and states which must be published through the media. This Report Card offers a productive assessment of how well the school is doing according to the guidelines established by the NCLB. Specifically, the report card addresses changes in overall cumulative reading and math scores. One

such report card of urban schools, called the Trial Urban District Assessment, reported in 2005, indicates:

Fourth-graders in 8 of 10 urban districts made larger gains in math than the national average. Fourth-graders in 7 of 10 urban districts made larger gains in reading than the national average. Eighth-graders in 7 of 10 urban districts made more progress in basic math skills than the national average. Overall, fourth-graders improved four points in science achievement over 1996 and 2000 levels, with the lowest-performing students making the largest gains.

African American and Hispanic fourth-graders made significant gains as well, narrowing the achievement gap ("No Child Left Behind Act is Working" 1).

The National Report Card is beneficial in that it brings information straight to the public eye. Publically reporting these evaluations allows parents, educators, and local government officials to assess where their school district or state stands in reference to the Act. However, recent views indicate that both parents and teachers complain that the law encourages "teaching to the test." Perfectly decent schools have been labeled failures. Most important, many states have set alarmingly low standards. According to Diane Ravitch, an influential and prominent scholar who once praised

NCLB, "...the emphasis on math and reading has crowded out other subjects. An accompanying push for charter (independent, government-funded) schools has had mixed results at best. One study found that 83% deliver results that are either the same as, or worse than, those of the public schools" (qtd in "United States: The Next Test; Schools Reform" 34). Moreover, what are most effectual with the NCLB Act's guidelines are the changes in classroom instruction. Standardized tests are given to students based on cumulative instruction and learning. Each student must be fully able to demonstrate the ability to know the material, rather than remembering key phrases or problems in order to pass the test. Cumulative testing negates the possibility of short term memory of the subject. Joseph Masserli, a writer for an organizational paper, states: "Because of the cumulative nature of their studies, students find school tougher and tougher as time goes by. Students fall further behind and become more discouraged. Standardized testing would ensure that students aren't pushed into a grade level they aren't ready for" (1). These standardized tests have also changed the focus for teachers to be more qualified to teach than what has been previously accepted, something that the NCLB Act was also designed to accomplish.

The NCLB Act demands highly qualified teachers in the classroom. In order to be considered a highly qualified teacher, one must possess a Bachelor's degree in a core subject or other specialized subject area (e.g.



computer science, philosophy, physical education) as well as be licensed or certified by the state (e.g. Praxis or CONNECT). Furthermore, veteran teachers must be evaluated by each state known as HOUSSE (High Objective Uniform State Standard of Evaluation). While the demand for highly qualified teachers is beneficial, the problem that NCLB has found, according to its criteria, is that only three states received an A grade, fourteen received a B, and the rest received a C or a D (Mantel, 9-10). NCLB pointed out that the major problems regarding qualified teachers lay in both rural and urban school environments. Veteran teachers received a Bachelor's degree in Education with no core subject. Even though the HOUSSE evaluation system allowed teachers to accumulate points to meet minimum requirements of the law, the evaluation "had nothing to do with content knowledge" (Mantel 10). In addition, qualified teachers who received a Bachelor's degree in a core subject have also been instructing in multiple subjects outside of their field.

In order to fully comply with the NCLB Act, states use and receive Federal education funding. The problem here is that most states are receiving hugely insufficient funds. In order to meet provisions of the law, "states must establish academic standards, create assessments, monitor schools' progress, help schools needing improvement, pay for students to transfer and receive tutoring and place highly qualified teachers in classrooms" (Mantel 12). For example, according to the State of

Connecticut," the state spent 41.6 million dollars of its own money in 2008 in order to comply with the NCLB. Ohio received 44 million dollars; however, in order to implement the NCLB, it cost the state 1.5 billion dollars" (Mantel 12).

The monetary funding problem has become so outrageous that some states have sued the Federal government and the Department of Education, claiming that the NCLB Act was difficult to comply with and that states and school districts had to spend their own funds in order to meet its requirements. Particularly, a lawsuit filed by the state of Michigan's Teacher's Union asserted "that federal funds given to the state were short by 27 billion dollars" (Mantel 18). In addition, Connecticut's Attorney General sued the Federal Department of Education claiming that the government's law was "illegal and unconstitutional and that annual testing had created an additional financial burden for the state" (Mantel 18). According to Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, the increase in state educational funding had dramatically created such a financial burden for the state, with little to no change in the outcome, that annual tests required by the NCLB Act had to be given bi-annually instead of every year.

Because of the many issues arising from the NCLB Act, current President Barack Obama requested a review of funding as well as the current criteria for the No Child Left Behind Law. This review includes not only a review of the law's policies, but also a proposal to increase federal education

spending by nine percent, or a total of 4.5 billion dollars. The review regarding current criteria will propose new rules where schools, school districts, and states will be evaluated according to higher testing standards and higher enforcement of teaching accountability. Essentially, the new proposal is centered on guidelines for helping all students graduate from high school and from college and ensuring they are career ready.

Additionally, the President is seeking to receive an additional budget of 1.35 billion dollars for a new program called Race to the Top. Forty states have applied for this grant .Awards of funding will be issued according to test standards, data collections, and graduation rates. Any remaining funds will be distributed for competitive programs to “turn around failing schools, improve teacher training, and boost high school graduation rates” (King 2). Most recently, the federal government has distributed the first phase of funding for this reform to the NCLB Act. The first two recipients, Delaware and Tennessee, were awarded the funds due to:

...high marks for the commitment to reform from key stakeholders, including elected officials, teacher's union leaders, and business leaders. In both states, all school districts were committed to implementing Race to the Top reforms. Delaware and Tennessee also have aggressive plans to improve teacher and principal evaluation, use data to inform instructional decisions, and turn around their lowest-

performing schools. ("Delaware and Tennessee Win First Race to the Top Grants" 1).

Race to the Top has generated a renewed enthusiasm to enhance the quality of our public schools. Legislators, state officials, and school district managers throughout the United States seem to be aggressively pursuing the new venture since the NCLB Act seems to be failing at an alarming rate. The following table lists the scores for all states and where they stand for the first phase of funding as of March 29, 2010.



## RACE TO THE TOP Phase 1 Final Results



| State                | Rank | Final Score | For Finalists Only |        |
|----------------------|------|-------------|--------------------|--------|
|                      |      |             | Tier 1 Score       | Change |
| Alabama              | 37   | 291.2       |                    |        |
| Arizona              | 40   | 240.2       |                    |        |
| Arkansas             | 17   | 394.4       |                    |        |
| California           | 27   | 336.8       |                    |        |
| Colorado             | 14   | 409.6       | 408.8              | 0.8    |
| Connecticut          | 25   | 344.6       |                    |        |
| Delaware             | 1    | 454.6       | 438.4              | 16.2   |
| District Of Columbia | 16   | 402.4       | 402.0              | 0.4    |
| Florida              | 4    | 431.4       | 425.0              | 6.4    |
| Georgia              | 3    | 433.6       | 434.4              | -0.8   |
| Hawaii               | 22   | 364.6       |                    |        |
| Idaho                | 28   | 331.0       |                    |        |
| Illinois             | 5    | 423.8       | 423.4              | 0.4    |
| Indiana              | 23   | 355.6       |                    |        |
| Iowa                 | 24   | 346.0       |                    |        |
| Kansas               | 29   | 329.6       |                    |        |
| Kentucky             | 9    | 418.8       | 416.4              | 2.4    |
| Louisiana            | 11   | 418.2       | 410.8              | 7.4    |
| Massachusetts        | 13   | 411.4       | 403.8              | 7.6    |
| Michigan             | 21   | 366.2       |                    |        |
| Minnesota            | 20   | 375.0       |                    |        |
| Missouri             | 33   | 301.4       |                    |        |
| Nebraska             | 39   | 247.4       |                    |        |
| New Hampshire        | 38   | 271.2       |                    |        |
| New Jersey           | 18   | 387.0       |                    |        |
| New Mexico           | 30   | 325.2       |                    |        |
| New York             | 15   | 408.6       | 411.2              | -2.6   |
| North Carolina       | 12   | 414.0       | 407.0              | 7      |
| Ohio                 | 10   | 418.6       | 423.4              | -4.8   |
| Oklahoma             | 34   | 294.6       |                    |        |
| Oregon               | 35   | 292.6       |                    |        |
| Pennsylvania         | 7    | 420.0       | 412.2              | 7.8    |
| Rhode Island         | 8    | 419.0       | 411.0              | 8      |
| South Carolina       | 6    | 423.2       | 423.2              | 0      |
| South Dakota         | 41   | 135.8       |                    |        |
| Tennessee            | 2    | 444.2       | 443.4              | 0.8    |
| Utah                 | 19   | 379.4       |                    |        |
| Virginia             | 31   | 324.8       |                    |        |
| West Virginia        | 36   | 292.4       |                    |        |
| Wisconsin            | 26   | 341.2       |                    |        |
| Wyoming              | 32   | 318.6       |                    |        |

Fig. 1. Table, United States. Department of Education. 29 March 2010.

When asked about Obama's Race to the Top program during a recent interview with the State of Tennessee's Mt. Juliet Elementary School third grade teacher, Geneva Smith, Smith reported that the new initiative has been highly received among her peers. Specifically, she claimed that Race to the Top has clarified the goals for teaching reform, goals for student achievement, and offered concrete objectives, not only in the elementary schools, but also at the high school graduation level. Mrs. Smith indicated that the program sheds specific light on proactive learning objectives for students and teaching objectives for educators.

I firmly believe that these new standards adopted by Tennessee's State Board of Education are headed in the right direction. Particularly, enhanced test measurements for students' success, improvements to classroom instruction, an improved teacher retention program and clarification of standards and assessments to prepare students for higher education, build a higher level of confidence in our states school system, not only for educators but parents and politicians as well (Smith).

Although this new initiative is still at its beginning stage, it is evident that Race to the Top has generated signs of optimism throughout the United States. The relief of monetary funding alone allows states to concentrate on the provisions of what the program is designed to accomplish. Furthermore, this proactive stance encourages teachers, school district managers, and

state education officials to compete among each other to provide better education for our children's future. All told, Race to the Top seems to be a strong "shot in the arm" to cure the disease known as the NCLB Act.

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