Welcome to Measurement, Inc.

by David Glovin

Last year reporter David Glovin of the Hackensack, New Jersey Record paid a visit to Measurement, Inc., a North Carolina company that had read and scored the New Jersey state writing proficiency exams. Although many of the details in Glovin's article are specifically concerned with the testing program in New Jersey, the influence of Measurement, Inc., and similar companies goes far beyond the borders of that state. Each year the company scores 4 million essays from 25 states. Should outside companies such as Measurement, Inc. be hired to do this “piece work”? Is there a better way? We'd like to know what our readers think.

In a boxy brick building sandwiched between tire stores and a sprawling factory in the heart of tobacco country, 70 North Carolina temp workers pass judgment on 100,000 New Jersey students.

This is where essays from standardized tests come to be scored—tests so important that high-school students cannot graduate without passing them, tests so vital that schools devote months to preparing for them.

But don’t expect to find many teachers working here. Ron Tanner is a former fighter pilot who has scored 150,000 essays in three years. Jeff Haubner is a recent college graduate who came to Durham in search of a job. Karen Anderson scored papers as she was launching her art gallery.

All told, they are a collection of college-educated jobbers who earn extra cash by evaluating the writing of New Jersey’s youth. Surprised that these readers are not teachers? New Jersey educators are. Not one of a dozen teachers or administrators interviewed, including several who managed testing programs, knew who scored the essays on these high-stakes exams. All assumed that the graders were teachers or other professional educators.

Nor are they aware that the graders for Measurement, Inc. erroneously fail at least a few students who produce acceptable essays. “We know we’re not perfect,” said Catherine Blue, a Measurement supervisor who oversees New Jersey’s tests. “I don’t expect to never change a score. If I think we scored it wrong, I change the score.”

But the firm says errors are the exception and that virtually all papers are scored accurately by the part-time scorers. “I wondered… how professional people would be,” said Tanner, the former pilot. “But it’s incredible how seriously people take it. We’re not just scoring papers. We’re scoring people.”

Essay Readers Get $7.75 an Hour Tops

Every October, 100,000 New Jersey juniors and seniors draft compositions as part of the High School Proficiency Test. Every November, the papers are shipped to Durham to be graded in a large, white-walled room.

Essays are now required from fourth- and eighth-graders, so 200,000 more will arrive in the spring. And the state plans to quadruple the number of essays demanded on the high school exam, which will add measurably to Measurement’s burden.

It’s an expensive process. New Jersey pays about $6 million a year to a testing company that helps create the eighth- and 11th-grade tests. That company, National Computer Systems, subcontracts the essays to Measurement, which receives up to $4.50 for every paper it grades. Test readers get no more than $7.75 an hour.

Is This the Best Way to Score Such Important Exams?

The state says yes. Two years ago, officials considered reverting the scoring to New Jersey, but they concluded it would be too daunting to try to find enough teachers during the school year.

Besides, state officials say, Measurement does a good job. “You’re talking about seven changes out of 80,000,” said Clyde Reese, director of testing in the New Jersey Department of Education. “I don’t think that’s problematic.”

A Measurement scoring supervisor agreed. “Teachers are no better trained to do this than we are,” said Judith Pugh. “We don’t have any preconceived ideas” about the students whose papers are being graded.

But teachers ask if it makes sense to use part-timers working in a former headache powder factory 500 miles from North Jersey. Indeed, when the company reviewed its scoring of 2,200 eighth-grade essays from New Jersey this spring, it found 24—or one in 92—that deserved a higher grade. Others received grades that should have been lower, but the company doesn’t lower scores during such reviews.