

**TOUCHSTONES at  
SEED PUBLIC  
CHARTER SCHOOL**

**Evaluation Summary**  
Based on Critical Reading and Thinking  
Tests and Teacher Questionnaire

**June 24, 2004**

## CRITICAL READING AND THINKING TEST

### Overview

In January 2004, before beginning Touchstones, students completed a short critical reading and thinking test designed to assess their abilities to

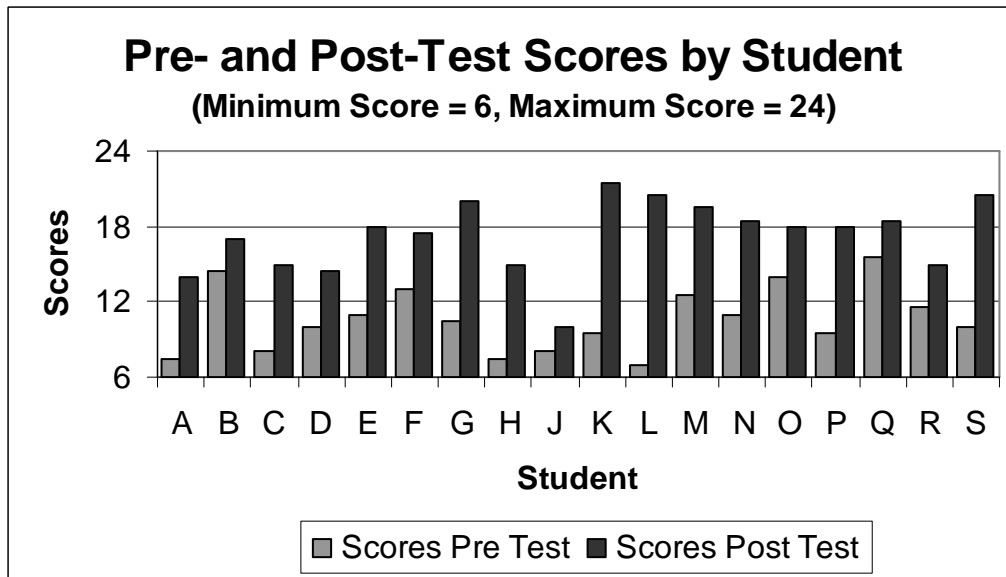
- Ask questions about a text (Question 1),
- Analyze an author's perspective (Questions 2 and 3),
- Relate a text to prior knowledge (Question 4), and
- Generate and explain their own ideas related to the text (Questions 5 and 6).

The test consisted of a short reading (less than one page) and six short answer questions that parallel the issues raised and skills practiced in Touchstones discussions. In June, after participating in Touchstones Discussions for five months, they were given a similar test based upon a different reading. Both tests were evaluated by two scorers using the following rubric:

1. **Poor:** Wholly unrelated response, misunderstood question, or left blank.
2. **Fair:** Somewhat related response or partial answer.
3. **Good:** Related response, mostly complete, mildly coherent thoughts.
4. **Excellent:** Very relevant response, complete, thoughtful and coherent, clear ideas.

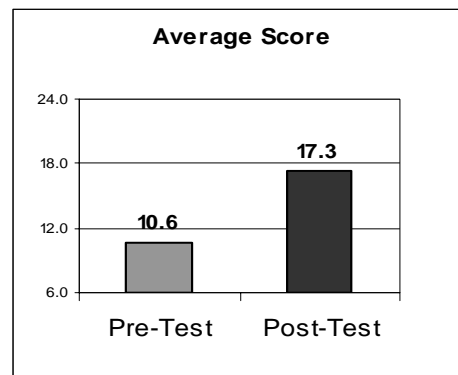
### Overall Scores

The charts below are from an 8<sup>th</sup> grade class. Only students for whom we had a pre- and a post-test are included.



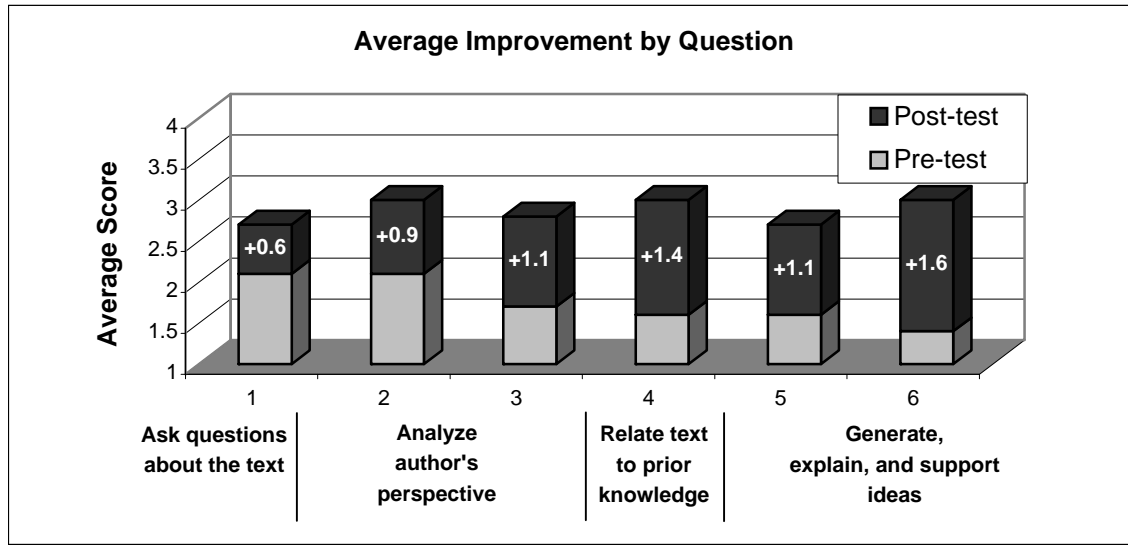
All 18 students for whom we had pre- and post-tests showed improvement. Pre-test scores ranged from 7 to 15.5 while the improved scores of the post-test ranged from 10 to 21.5. In addition, the score of 10 was the only score below 14 in the post-test.

The chart on the right shows the average scores of all students on both tests. With 6 being the lowest possible scores, the scores rose 6.7 points from 10.6 to 17.3, a 63% improvement.



## Scores by Question Type

As mentioned above, the questions asked for students to demonstrate four different types of critical reading and thinking skills: 1) Asking questions about a text, 2) Analyzing an author's perspective, 3) Relating the text to prior knowledge and personal opinion, and 4) Generating, supporting and explaining ideas. The chart below shows average student scores on each type of question. Again, a question left blank or unanswered due to misunderstanding the question or giving an irrelevant answer scored a 1, while an excellent answer scored a 4.

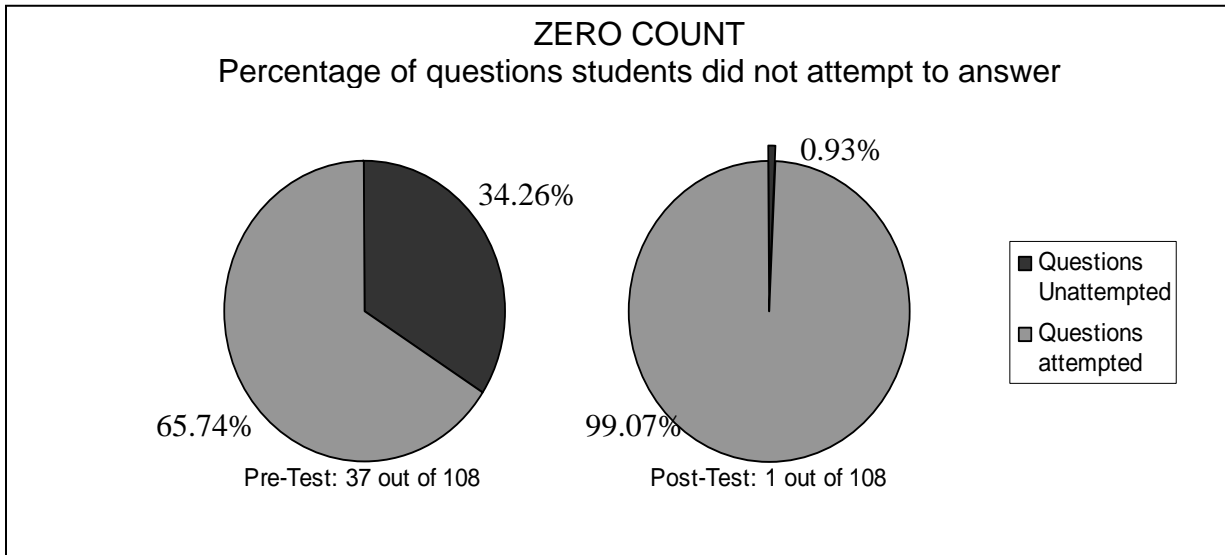


On the scale of 1 to 4, students showed significant improvement in all areas and particularly dramatic improvement in the latter three categories where they scored a full point or more higher on questions 3-6.

The quality and depth of student answers, particularly an increase in their supporting their opinions with examples and explanation, accounted for a large part of the increase.

## Zero Count

Our sample had 108 questions total—six questions for each of the eighteen students who took both tests. While the tests were being scored, another noteworthy pattern emerged. In the pretest, several of the students did not even attempt to answer three types of questions. These questions asked the students to 1) examine the author’s perspective, 2) compare the author’s perspective with their own, and 3) generate their own arguments on the topic. In the post-test, only one student did not attempt to answer all six questions. The chart below shows the percentage of questions left blank by all students on both tests.



We are not sure what accounts for such a dramatic difference, but we have seen this situation appear in other schools that have taken this same test. Indeed, changes to the design of the test (including different readings and altering the phrasing of the questions) haven’t changed the fact that there are many unanswered questions before students do Touchstones and very few after. While we cannot say with certainty what underlies this difference, some possible explanations are 1) that students took the test more seriously after Touchstones, 2) that they had not had exposure to this type of questioning before, 3) students better understood the questions, and 4) that the practice of exploring different perspectives in Touchstones led them to be more capable of applying different perspectives on the test.

**Teacher Feedback:** Comments from an end of year questionnaire in June

**How do you see the discussion process changing students' skills, attitudes, habits?**

- “It definitely helps with critical thinking skills and confidence.”
- “The discussions allowed students to dig into the text. They would refer back to it which showed their improved reading skills.”
- “Students have become more willing to resolve disagreements in small groups. They have also improved their abilities to divide collaboratively.”

**What changes in your students do you think are most beneficial?**

- “Being excited to listen to each other rather than just being heard. Letting another person speak before them. Referring to the text when they voice opinions.”
- “Students have become more metacognitive discussion participants: they have begun to comment both on the substance and the social process of discussion.”

**Do students use these new skills in other academic environments at school?**

- “My first period builds on each others' responses in all types of discussions now. They also are used to seeing each other as valuable and intelligent members of the community, so they collaborate independently on writing projects as well.”

**Do you think the program is necessary? Why?**

- “Yes, it is a great model for how to have an effective discussion. The skills are easy to transfer to regular class discussions.”
- “Yes. Students need to have more voice in the classroom setting and Touchstones gives them a way to practice this in a respectful way. It also gives them another avenue to use their understanding of the things they read.”
- “Yes. Middle school and high school students need exposure to a seminar format and classic texts as early as possible.”

**How do the Touchstones goals match your own class goals?**

- “Very well – my class goals are to practice and improve critical thinking and communication skills.”
- “Perfectly. I hope to use texts and writings to help improve both students' skills and their ability to relate to each other respectfully and without a teacher as intermediate.”
- “Teaching respect is key to my classroom goals as well as listening skills.”