Years ago, I (Robyn) was in the midst of changing schools and preparing to teach middle school language arts. Weeks before the school year was to start, I visited my new school to gather materials, research the curriculum, and scope out my new classroom. While there, I met another language arts teacher who volunteered to show me my classroom and answer my questions. On the way to my new room, she nodded to a neighboring classroom and shared a story that has stayed with me as I have watched the changing landscape of education over the past several years. It seems that one day my new friend was beginning a lesson when she decided, as teachers sometimes do, that the lesson wasn’t progressing as planned. She determined that a change of plans was needed. So while students were working, she sent a few out at a time to go to their lockers for their books. In the middle of this process, my new neighbor opened her door and asked my friend whether or not she had any WD40. Puzzled, my friend said no, referred her to the custodian, and returned to her teaching. A few minutes later, my new neighbor was back with WD40 in hand, tending to the hinges of my friend’s door. Apparently, the squeaking of the door opening and closing as students visited and returned from their lockers had distracted her so much that she had to stop what she was doing next door and tend to the problem.

So why do we begin this issue of *Language Arts* with the story of the squeaky door? Simple. It helps conceptualize the questions we attempt to tackle. Over time, I grew fond of my new neighbor. I could not deny, however, that her very traditional approach emphasized straight rows, books on tape, worksheets, and quizzes. The emphasis was on the content rather than the students. This class embodied standardization. It was quiet. It was well mannered. It tolerated very little noise. But was it best for students? We don’t think so.

Sometimes, meeting students’ needs means we have to make a little noise. We have to open the door to new resources. We have to allow our students to leave the classroom from time to time. We have to recognize that there is no such thing as a standard student. Yet in an age of accountability, recognizing—or at least acting upon—student differences has become increasingly difficult. For many teachers, the looming reality of newly mandated performance assessments designed to measure teacher effectiveness makes them less likely to stray from a standardized approach. They focus on the test, quietly teaching in straight rows and from books that purport to teach the standards measured through the test.

This special issue of *Language Arts* is about taking ownership of teacher performance assessment. It is about confronting—if not thriving amid—the tensions that are created when standardization meets the diversity of teacher practice and student learning. Our contributors depict overlapping contrasts—between policy mandates and enacted teacher preparation practice; between high-stakes teacher evaluation and thoughtful teacher decision making; between evidence for learning and responsive action; from programmatic collaboration to accountability; and finally among international educational systems. We invited authors to consider how teachers can take ownership over performance assessments. We asked them to consider

*Language Arts*, Volume 93, Number 2, November 2015

Copyright © 2015 by the National Council of Teachers of English. All rights reserved.
how language arts teachers can use these assessments to improve their practices and demonstrate their expertise with multiple audiences.

We are pleased that the authors featured have taken up this challenge and shared their insights. Amy Johnson Lachuk and Karen Koellner begin the conversation in “Performance-Based Assessment for Certification: Insights from edTPA Implementation” by sharing how they are preparing future teachers to negotiate the tensions between the state-mandated Education Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA) and the reflective practices that characterize good teaching. While the article is not specific to ELA, we felt its inclusion is appropriate because it gives readers a clearer picture of the complete teacher performance assessment landscape. By understanding both preservice and inservice teachers’ experiences with performance assessments, ELA teachers can better explore ways to leverage these assessments to refine their practices.

In “The Implications of Teacher Performance Assessments and the Impact on Teacher Decision Making,” Renee Moran extends the conversation by examining how one state’s implementation of a teacher performance assessment has affected teacher practice. She offers suggestions for how to approach working with mandated policies on teacher assessment and urges policy makers to consider teacher autonomy and subjectivity as part of the larger equation.

Similarly, in his commentary “Growth through Language Arts and the Conundrum of Teacher Evaluation,” Peter Smagorinsky takes objectivity to task in his discussion of the student growth model as a basis for teacher evaluation. Drawing upon John Dixon’s classic work, “Growth through English,” Smagorinsky describes how the current teacher and student assessment regime limits the very growth the language arts nurture in students.

He reminds us of what should be happening in ELA classrooms and offers suggestions on how we might reimagine assessment. In “Starting with the Why in Teacher Preparation: Community,” Sean Kottke, Paula McPhee, Arlene Lents, and Meredith Dodson posit that the current conversations about teacher assessment are addressing the wrong questions. Rather than focusing on the what and how, they argue that the appropriate question should be “Why make good teachers?” They describe how their teacher education approach embraces the community in order to answer this question, resulting in practices that support making good teachers. Finally, in “Chicago Public Schools and Performance Assessments for Teacher Evaluation,” Peter Leonard, Didi Swartz, and John Barker describe how the Chicago Public School system has responded to a state-mandated evaluation system by creating a system that allows teachers to own the process and use the tests for multiple purposes.

To wrap up our themed issue, “Conversation Currents” shares our interview with Marc Tucker, the head of the National Center on Education and the Economy, the founder of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and a frequent writer about international comparisons among countries with regard to their educational systems and educational achievement. Here, Tucker contrasts the language arts assessment practices in the United States with other leading countries’ practices. In doing so, he offers suggestions for how to reform our assessment practices.

In addition to these themed pieces, you will find the columns that regularly appear in the pages of Language Arts. In the Research and Policy column, Rachael Gabriel continues with this issue’s theme by describing the challenges and limitations of the current teacher performance assessments and offering suggestions on how to refocus our efforts. In the Professional Books Review column, you will once again find resources for your classroom.

In the Children’s Literature Reviews column, members of the committees for the 2015 Charlotte Huck Award for Outstanding Fiction for Children and the 2015 Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction present the winners and honor books.
And, finally, you will be introduced to the winners of the Outstanding Educator Award, Anne Haas Dyson and Celia Genishi.

We hope this issue will prompt teachers to reflect upon how to take ownership of the assessment process. The language arts encompass the very skills that equip both teachers and students to make some noise. Through language arts, students learn to listen carefully, read critically, write persuasively, and speak passionately. These are the very skills language arts teachers can use as they resist passive acceptance of performance assessment as something done to them. Instead, teachers can become part of the assessment process and demonstrate how to use feedback to improve their practice—just as students can improve their own skills through the feedback and assessment cycle. In this way, teachers can become that squeaky door, distracting those who are focused on standardization in ways that are detrimental to student learning.

Robyn Seglem is an associate professor in the School of Teaching and Learning at Illinois State University. She can be reached at rseglem@ilstu.edu. Mark Conley is a professor in teacher education at the University of Memphis and can be reached at mwconley@memphis.edu.

Edwyna Wheadon Postgraduate Training Scholarship for Public School Teachers

English/language arts teachers working in public educational institutions are eligible to apply for an Edwyna Wheadon Postgraduate Training Scholarship. This $500 award supports postgraduate training to enhance teaching skills and/or career development in teaching. To qualify, the recipient’s degree or non-degree course must be provided by an accredited, degree-granting public or private two-year junior or community college, four-year college or university, or graduate or professional school. Recipients must be NCTE members at the time of award. The application deadline is January 31. For more information, see http://www.ncte.org/second/awards/wheadon.