

## WRITING PROJECT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS YIELDS GAINS IN STUDENT WRITING ACHIEVEMENT

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR EDUCATORS stands at the core of the National Writing Project's (NWP) work to improve the teaching of writing in our nation's schools. The NWP network provides programs for teachers of writing at all grade levels, primary through university, and in all subjects. A central feature of the NWP model is that the design of professional development programs is tailored to local needs, reform priorities, and school conditions. At nearly 200 university-based writing project sites nationwide, NWP leaders emphasize common principles of high-quality instruction and the professional development necessary to support it, while they design and deliver services that are coordinated with local education authorities.

The nine studies summarized here were conducted by local writing project sites to examine the effects of NWP professional development programs on teacher practices and student writing achievement in schools and districts served by the sites. The results demonstrate that professional development programs designed and delivered by NWP sites and based on common core principles have a positive effect on the writing achievement of students of writing project teachers across a range of grade levels, schools, and contexts.

### KEY FINDINGS

In nine independent studies, in every measured attribute of writing, the improvement of students whose teachers participated in NWP professional development exceeded that of students whose teachers were not participants.

The studies took place in rural, urban, and suburban areas across the country and included students with diverse economic, language, racial, and ethnic backgrounds.

Student results are strong and favorable in those aspects of writing for which the NWP is best known, such as development of ideas and organization.

Students in writing project classrooms made greater gains than their peers on writing conventions as well, suggesting that NWP professional development also helps teachers improve their students' basic skills.

## THE STUDIES

---

All of the studies employed pre and post measures of student writing, comparing the performance of students whose teachers had participated in NWP programming to that of students whose teachers had not. Every study involved the direct performance assessment of student writing. At a national scoring conference, independent scorers applied the Analytic Writing Continuum (NWP 2006) with considerable reliability and technical rigor as determined by an independent review of the procedures by SRI International.

---

### Gateway Writing Project, University of Missouri, St. Louis

*Study Location: Saint Louis County, Missouri*

A 2006 study examined the effects of a program that sought to develop a core group of teacher-leaders who could build and sustain a literacy-improvement model focused on the teaching of writing in grades 3, 4, and 5. A 2007 study examined the effects of a similar program at the middle and high school levels. The studies matched teachers and students to ensure comparability on qualitative and quantitative demographics and performance variables. Data sources included interviews, classroom observations, and student writing samples. Program effectiveness was measured by teachers' adoption of successful practices as well as by their students' writing performance.

### Mississippi Writing/Thinking Institute, Mississippi State University

*Study Location: Mississippi (statewide)*

A 2006 study examined the impact of writing project partnerships focused on the writing achievement of ninth-graders in two high schools with predominately African American student populations. A 2007 study examined the impact of professional development on teachers' instructional strategies and on specific outcomes in student writing in grades 3, 4, and 5. Teachers' classroom practices were analyzed to determine the degree to which writing instruction strategies presented in NWP professional development were implemented. The studies also examined the correlation between scores on prominent and syntactic features in students' writing and their writing assessment scores.

### New York City Writing Project (NYCWP), Lehman College

*Study Location: New York City*

Research in 2006 studied teacher and student outcomes resulting from partnerships focused on improving writing instruction in six urban high schools. A 2007 study investigated the impact on student writing of a partnership between the NYCWP and six high schools in a large urban district where challenges include poverty, low student achievement, inexperienced teachers, and increasing pressures from high-stakes testing. The research examined how the professional development supported teachers' growth and affected student writing. Analysis of teachers' growth was based on interviews and surveys about instructional practices and attitudes. Students' growth was measured by pre and post assessments of student writing.

### South Coast Writing Project, University of California, Santa Barbara

*Study Location: Ventura and Kern Counties, California*

A 2006 study examined teacher and student outcomes of a partnership focused on writing improvement in four elementary and middle schools serving high-poverty populations with substantial numbers of English language learners. A 2007 study examined the effects of a program focused on the teaching of writing in grades 3-8. Surveys, interviews, classroom observations, and teacher and student work were used to measure the effect of the professional development on teachers' classroom practice. A survey adapted from an established measure of writing apprehension (Daly and Miller 1975) examined the impact on student attitudes. Writing performance was measured by timed writing prompts administered in a pre-post fashion.

### Sunbelt Writing Project, Auburn University

*Study Location: Alabama (statewide)*

A 2008 study examined teacher practices and student outcomes in 17 secondary English classrooms of writing project teacher-consultants and 15 comparison classrooms. The study investigated whether teachers who have extensive writing lives are more likely to view writing as an open-ended, rather than routine, task; whether this understanding would lead them to establish classroom environments where writing is taught as a non-routine composing process, rather than a prescribed, routine task; and whether these factors might predict student writing achievement. Teachers' survey reports were analyzed in relation to their students' performance on pre and post writing assessments.

# RESULTS

ON SEVEN MEASURES OF WRITING PERFORMANCE tested across the nine studies, students of NWP teachers outperformed their non-NWP counterparts in all 63 contrasts. In 35 (56%) of these contrasts, the differences were so large as to be statistically significant. In no case did students in comparison groups equal or outperform students in NWP classes. The consistency of these findings confirms the effectiveness of NWP professional development.

Student writing showed particularly strong improvement in the areas of *content*, *structure*, and *stance*. These elements concern the quality of thought and the manner in which it is expressed in the writing. Students in NWP classrooms also had better results for *conventions* in all studies, with statistically significant results in four of nine studies. The table below summarizes findings on the seven measures of writing performance. Upward-pointing triangles are positive findings: students of NWP teachers outscored their counterparts with non-NWP teachers. Solid triangles represent differences large enough to be considered statistically significant.

## SUMMARY OF STUDENT WRITING PERFORMANCE

	CONTENT	STRUCTURE	STANCE	SENTENCE FLUENCY	DICTION	CONVENTIONS	HOLISTIC SCORE
St. Louis County 2006 Grades 3, 4, 5	▲	▲	▲	▲	△	▲	▲
St. Louis County 2007 Grades 6–11	△	△	▲	▲	△	△	△
Mississippi 2006 Grade 9	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲
Mississippi 2007 Grades 3, 4, 5	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲
NYC 2006 Grades 9–12	▲	▲	▲	△	▲	▲	▲
NYC 2007 Grades 9–12	△	△	▲	△	△	△	△
Ventura County 2006 Grades 4–8	△	△	△	△	△	△	△
Ventura & Kern Counties 2007 Grades 3–8	△	△	△	△	▲	△	△
Alabama 2008 Grades 9–12	▲	▲	▲	▲	△	△	▲

- ▲ Favorable Results Significant
- △ Favorable Results Not Significant
- No Difference\*
- ▼ Unfavorable Results Significant\*
- ▽ Unfavorable Results Not Significant\*

### ASSESSMENT CATEGORY DESCRIPTIONS

- Content**, including quality and development of ideas
- Structure**, the arrangement of ideas and supporting evidence
- Stance**, success in expressing perspective
- Sentence Fluency**, including appropriate variety in length and type
- Diction**, including appropriateness and maturity of words and expressions
- Conventions** of grammar, mechanics, and usage
- Holistic Assessment**, an independent score describing the quality of the piece as a whole

\*None appear in the table, as no such results were observed.

## OVERALL STUDENT CHANGE FROM PRE TO POST ASSESSMENTS

The chart on the right illustrates the amount of change exhibited by program and comparison students in each of the nine studies, measured holistically. In each case, program students show growth while comparison students often show little or no growth in their writing performance and, on occasion, show a decline in writing performance.

## METHODOLOGY

While every study was tailored to local contexts to enhance its validity, certain methodological elements were consistent across all studies:

### *Comparative Reference*

All studies incorporated comparison groups selected for similarity to program groups in grade level, economic status, percentage of ELL students, types of communities, ethnicity, policy contexts, and (where available) scores on previous measures of performance.

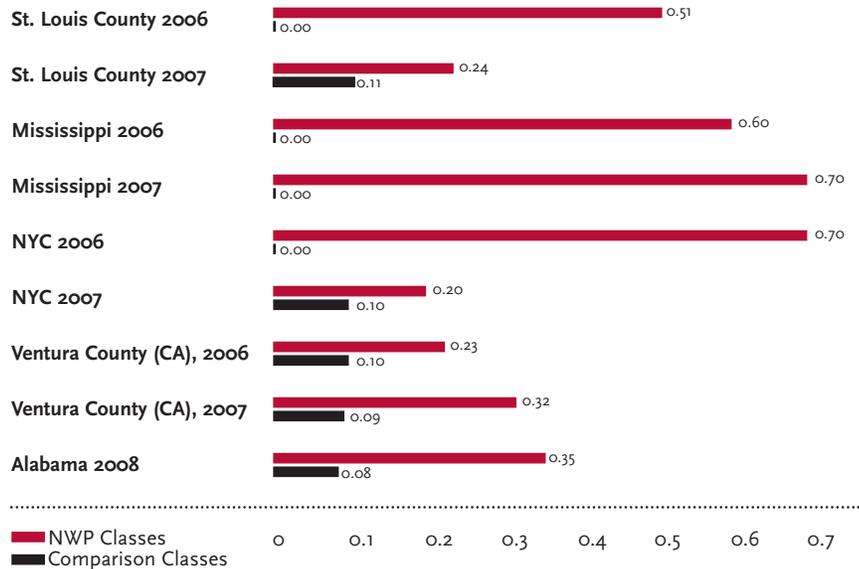
### *Pre and Post Writing Assessments*

Student writing samples were taken from both program and comparison groups at the beginning of the school year and again at the end, after delivery of the professional development. Samples were analyzed for growth between pre and post assessments for program and comparison groups. Differences in growth between program and comparison groups were also analyzed.

### *Independent Scoring of Student Writing*

To ensure technical rigor and credibility of data, scoring and data processing were conducted nationally and independently of local sites. All student writing samples were scored using a common evaluative framework, the NWP Analytic Writing Continuum (AWC), a modified version of the *6 + 1 Trait Writing Model* (Bellamy 2005). Scorer reliability (defined as inter-rater agreement) was 91% across all scoring categories.

## COMPARISON OF STUDENT WRITING CHANGE FROM PRE TO POST ASSESSMENTS



Entries represent raw scale points on a six-point scale.

### *Students, Teachers, and Schools*

The total number of students in program and comparison groups of the nine studies was 3,143. They included public school students in third through twelfth grades; students receiving free or reduced-price lunch as well as those paying full price; students in urban, small city, and rural communities; and students of differing ethnicities. In four of the studies the majority of students were English language learners. Fifty-eight schools and 204 teachers participated in the nine studies.

## REFERENCES

- Bellamy, Peter C., ed. 2005. *Seeing with New Eyes: Using the 6+1 Trait® Writing Model*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.
- Blau, Sheridan D., Rosemary H. Cabe, and Anne Whitney. 2006. *Evaluating IIMPaC: Teacher and Student Outcomes Through a Professional Development Program in the Teaching of Writing*. Berkeley, CA: National Writing Project.
- Campos, Anne, and Roger Peach. 2006. *The Impact of the New York City Writing Project: Teacher and Student Outcomes of a Professional Development Model for Improving the Teaching of Writing*. Berkeley, CA: National Writing Project.
- Daly, J.A., and M.D. Miller. 1975. "The Empirical Development of an Instrument to Measure Writing Apprehension." *Research in the Teaching of English* 9: 242-249.
- National Writing Project. 2006. *Analytic Writing Continuum*. Berkeley, CA: National Writing Project.
- National Writing Project. 2008, January. *Local Site Research Initiative Report: Cohorts II and III 2004-2005, 2005-2006; Summary Report of National Results*. Berkeley, CA: National Writing Project.
- Singer, Nancy Robb, and Diane Scollay. 2006. *Increasing Student Achievement in Writing Through Teacher Inquiry: An Evaluation of Professional Development Impact*. Berkeley, CA: National Writing Project.
- Swain, Sherry Seale, Richard L. Graves, and David Morse. 2006. *The Effect of Mississippi Writing/Thinking Institute Professional Development on the Writing Achievement of Ninth-Graders*. Berkeley, CA: National Writing Project.



**NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT** tel: 510.642.0963  
 University of California fax: 510.642.4545  
 2105 Bancroft Way #1042 nwp@nwp.org  
 Berkeley, CA 94720-1042 www.nwp.org