

Research and Knowledge Base for the CWP Model and Programs

RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE BASE FOR THE CWP PROGRAMS THAT SUPPORT CALIFORNIA'S NCLB PLAN

An expansive body of evidence regarding the most effective ways to improve the teaching and learning of writing informs the work of the California Writing Project. Included here are the most relevant references that underpin the CWP programs that make use of NCLB funds.

Professional development in writing should focus on:

A. Increasing Academic Content Knowledge in Composition and Writing

- Professional development should focus on subject matter knowledge and teacher's content skills (Kennedy, 1998).
- Programs that focus on subject matter knowledge and student learning of subject matter knowledge have more positive effects on student learning than programs that focus on teaching behaviors alone (Kennedy, 1998).
- Where there is little faculty knowledge about composition research and pedagogy, formulaic approaches and the testing system itself tend to become the default knowledge base for writing, rather than the deep understanding of composition necessary to teach the full range of writing and literacy standards that will not only prepare students for the test but for their other classroom studies and their work beyond school (Hillocks, 2002).

B. Integrating Writing Content, Process, and Skills

- Teaching writing well involves multiple teaching strategies that address process and product, form and content, correctness and craft. Teaching students, minority students in particular, to write and communicate effectively necessitates instruction that integrates writing content, writing process, and essential skills "rather than 'underteaching low-scoring students' through superficial applications of either process or product approaches in isolation" (Delpit, 1995).
- Writing is essential for connecting to and engaging in content and connecting intellectually with subject matter, thereby, improving learning and the writing about that learning. Engagement with and understanding of the content are essential if students are to learn well the organizational patterns and language skills of academic writing (Sommers, 2001).
- The process of writing is not a series of steps or stages but rather a set of thinking processes which writers organize during the act of composing, revising, editing, and learning (Dyson and Freedman, 2003; Sperling and Freedman, 2003).
- Professional development must encourage teachers to explicitly emphasize content, critical thinking, and inquiry strategies in their teaching of academic writing to students (Hillocks, 2002).

C. Linking Writing Content Standards and Performance Standards; Linking Teaching and Learning

- Professional development must help teachers connect their teaching with specific standards for student performance (Hawley and Valli, 1999).
- The particular teachers in the writing project's Focus on Standards study who made effective use of standards, intentionally linked their study of the content and performance standards in writing, the underlying composition research and the professional standards of the discipline of composition, a close examination of the writing of individual writers against local, state, and university performance standards, and their teaching. These teachers were actively engaged in linking their teaching of writing with their students' writing improvement (Inverness Research Associates, 2001).

D. Improving the Writing of Diverse Learners

- Professional development must address the full range of learners, giving special attention to high priority students (Reading/Language Arts Framework for California Public Schools, 1999).
- Writing is the gatekeeper for secondary students to graduation and to higher education. Because the writing development of English learners is interdependent with their academic progress, EL/ELD students need explicit instruction in the multiple genres of academic writing and reading and in using the English of academic writing (Olsen, 1997; Harklau, Losey, and Siegal, 1999).
- Programs that focus on teaching English learners to speak and read English, while neglecting teaching those same students how to master the academic writing of school, prevent English learners from succeeding (Valdes, 1998).
- Writing project teachers surveyed by IRA in 2001 and 2002 stated that the writing project helped them become more up-to-date on the latest research, more familiar with strategies to teach diverse and struggling students, and more knowledgeable about helping English learners reach standards (Inverness Research Association, 2002).

E. Helping Teachers Organize Writing Instruction for Improvement

- In higher performing schools and classrooms, teachers are supported to use a variety of teaching approaches, to help students learn skills and knowledge in multiple lesson types, to help students learn strategies for doing the work successfully and for being generative thinkers, and to integrate test preparation into their teaching (Langer, 2000).
- Complex knowledge, linguistic, and problem-solving skills, the kind embedded in writing, require more sophisticated teaching and assessment strategies. This kind of teaching and assessment can be achieved only by setting higher learning and performance goals (Resnick, 1989; Langer, 2000; Farr and Beck, 2003; Frey and Hiebert, 2003).
- Assessments aligned with instructional goals and curriculum materials are more effective at improving educational quality (Popham, 1987).
- Teachers in the schools that work in multi-year partnerships with the California Writing Project are able to translate what they learn into higher performance goals for their students and use instructional and assessment practices that correlate with higher achievement scores more often than other teachers (Inverness Research Association, 2003).

Support for schools and districts should focus on:

- Building professional communities that focus on standards, support collective review of student work and provide shared professional development experiences for both faculty and administrators— the level of professional community positively affects student achievement (Newman and Welhage, 1995).
- Developing situated communities of practice in schools that offer a context of sustained learning in which teachers can generate new knowledge and focus on improving their teaching and their students' learning (McLaughlin and Talbert, 1993; Lieberman and Wood, 2003).
- Developing the leadership of experienced teachers in the school or district community focused on improving instruction and leadership as a practice distributed among colleagues (Elmore 2000).
- Emphasizing writing improvement, one of the characteristics found in schools with high achievement, high minority enrollment, and high poverty levels (Reeves 2000).

To summarize:

- Studies showing the writing project's impact on student performance and behavior are numerous. Often using a controlled comparative method, studies have demonstrated that the writing project leads to increases in student achievement.... The writing project provides efficient and effective staff development to teachers who wish to improve their students' performance in writing. As a long-standing program with rigorous, on-going evaluation, the writing project is a model of focused staff development that can be altered to accommodate the specific needs of schools and districts (Killion, 1999).
- National assessments of writing over the past three decades have repeatedly shown that students spend too little time writing in and out of school to reach high levels of writing achievement (Applebee, 1984 and 1992). Teachers who engage in systematic and sustained professional development with the writing project spend far greater time on writing instruction than most teachers across the state and nation (Academy for Educational Development, 2001).

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