Improving Writing in Secondary Schools

by Rhonda Barton and Jennifer Klump

In this era of high-stakes testing, student achievement in reading and mathematics has grabbed the national spotlight. Some would argue that it has come at the expense of writing, even though writing is a vital component of literacy that helps students organize, extend, and deepen the information, ideas, and insight they gain from reading. It is also a vehicle for informing, persuading, and inspiring others.

“Writing today is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many,” according to the National Commission on Writing (2003, p. 11). In a 2004 survey by the commission, respondents from 120 major U.S. corporations identified writing as a “threshold skill” that can make or break someone’s chances for employment and promotion (p. 3). A job candidate’s writing abilities are of special interest in the high-growth fields of service and finance, insurance, and real estate. More than 80% of companies surveyed in those industries reported that they assess writing during hiring. In addition, the survey found that employers spent billions of dollars each year on remedial writing training.

Costly writing remediation is also widespread on college campuses. According to college instructors, half of high school graduates are not prepared for college-level writing (Hart, 2005). More than a third of college students say their writing does not measure up to expectations for quality and an even higher percentage (38%) of high school graduates in the workplace say the same thing (Hart).

Those statistics are not surprising given students’ performance on one national writing assessment. In 2007, the National Assessment

Just the Facts

- “Writing is everybody’s business, and state and local curriculum guidelines should require writing in every curriculum area and at all grade levels” (National Commission on Writing, 2003, p. 5).
- Teachers and administrators must “build common performance expectations by convening regular workshops on what constitutes good writing, particularly at the middle and high school levels where each student has several teachers” (National Commission on Writing, 2003, p. 34).
- “This study suggested that when teachers experience the writing process as writers (rather than solely as readers or teachers), they are better able to support students in using the same strategies” (NWP, 2008, p. 3).
- Provide ongoing professional development that shares effective practices and good student writing samples and assignments (NWP & Nagin, 2006, p. 104).

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of Educational Progress (NAEP) measured the writing proficiency of more than 165,000 students in grades 8 and 12. Scores were categorized as Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, or Advanced. Although the number of 8th- and 12th-grade students who scored at or above the Basic level increased from previous assessments in 2002 and 1998, the number performing at or above Proficient showed no significant change since 2002. Only one third of 8th-graders and a quarter of seniors scored at or above Proficient. Just 2% of 8th-graders and 1% of 12th-graders reached the Advanced ranks. At the other end of the scale, 12% of 8th-graders and 18% of 12th-graders were ranked Below Basic (Salahu-Din, Persky, & Miller, 2008).

Given the number of students who need help in improving their writing and the importance of developing better writers, school leaders can benefit from examining and implementing the research on effective writing strategies.

**Good Writing Instruction**

Building on the influential *Reading Next* study, Graham and Perin (2007) identified key elements of effective adolescent writing instruction in *Writing Next*. They analyzed 142 experimental and quasi-experimental studies that contrasted the performance of a treatment group with that of a control group. The authors concluded that “no single approach to writing instruction will meet the needs of all students” (p. 11). However, 11 related strategies—combined to meet the needs of specific groups of students—appear to have the greatest impact. The elements, listed in order of their positive effect, include:

- **Writing strategies**—Teach students how to plan, revise, and edit their work
- **Summarization**—Provide explicit and systematic instruction in how to summarize texts
- **Collaborative writing**—Develop ways for students to work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions
- **Specific product goals**—Give students writing goals that include a clear purpose for the assignment and specific characteristics of the finished piece
- **Word processing**—Use computers and word processors as instructional supports for writing assignments
- **Sentence combining**—Teach students to craft more complex, sophisticated sentences by linking basic sentences
- **Prewriting**—Provide activities that help students plan, gather information, and organize ideas for their compositions
- **Inquiry activities**—Engage students in analyzing immediate, concrete data to help them develop ideas and content for a particular writing assignment
- **Process writing approach**—Interweave a number of writing instruction activities in a workshop environment stress extended to writing opportunities, writing for authentic audiences, personalized instruction, and cycles of writing
- **Study of models**—Give students opportunities to read, analyze, and emulate models of good writing
- **Writing for content learning**—Use writing as a tool for learning content material (pp. 15–21).

The researchers also found—to their surprise—that traditional grammar instruction did not help improve students’ writing. In fact, it produced a small, but statistically significant, negative effect. They concluded “such findings raise serious questions about some educators’ enthusiasm for traditional grammar instruction as a focus of writing instruction for adolescents” (Graham & Perrin, 2007, p. 21). Instead, they advocated the use of alternative
Leading a Writing Initiative

According to Michael Fullan (cited in Booth & Rowsell, 2002), a principal needs expertise in the content of literacy and in leading the change process to improve literacy in his or her school. Principals must monitor the overall effectiveness of any writing initiative by conducting classroom observations that consider:

- Do teachers share quality writing examples from different genres?
- Do students engage in writing several times during the day?
- Do students select their own topics, compose a first draft, and revise their work?
- Do students participate in instruction through personal conferences, interactive writing lessons, and opportunities to share their work? (p. 73)

Challenges in Boosting Writing

A report by the National Commission on Writing (2003) identifies four primary challenges to boosting writing.

The need for meaningful assessments. The report acknowledges that although assessment plays a crucial role in improving writing achievement, there are a number of roadblocks: standards vary widely, evaluators have different expectations, and judgments often rely on one sample. “No single piece of writing, even generated under ideal conditions, can serve as an adequate indicator of overall proficiency” (p. 22), state the authors. They add that writing tests must allow students enough time to produce their pieces and should include different measurement instruments for different goals, such as program evaluation, institutional accountability, and student learning.

Adequate time for writing instruction. According to NAEP data, only half of 12th-grade students say they are assigned a paper of three or more pages in an English class once or twice a month. Almost 40% never or rarely get such assignments. Similarly, senior research papers have been jettisoned by many teachers because they don’t have the time to process them. The report stresses that more
time must be devoted to writing and teachers need resources to support writing.

**Appropriate pre-service training and professional development.** Few teachers see themselves as writers and few states require courses in writing for teacher certification. The report suggests that teachers receive high-quality training opportunities to ensure that they understand what good writing looks like and can help their students achieve it. As the report stated, “Writing is everybody’s business, and state and local curriculum guidelines should require writing in every curriculum area and at all grade levels” (p. 5).

**The importance of integrating technology into writing instruction.** Educators should tap into students’ interest in new methods of writing such as e-mail, text messaging, and blogging. But to do so, policymakers must provide students and teachers with access to new technology and to the training they need to effectively use such tools.

A recent study of the Maine Middle School Laptop Program (Silvernail & Gritter, 2007) illustrated the impact that technology can have on writing. Since 2002, Maine has provided all seventh- and eighth-grade students with their own Apple iBook laptops, wireless networking, and Internet access. Students may take the laptops home for use after school, on weekends, and during school vacations. Teachers not only receive laptops but also technical assistance and professional development as well: a teacher leader at each of the state’s 243 middle schools helps teachers integrate the computers into their curriculum and practice.

Silvernail and Gritter compared students’ scores on Maine’s writing achievement test before and after the laptop program. They found that the average writing score in 2005 was 3.44 points higher than in 2000, meaning that the average student in 2005 scored higher than two-thirds of all students in 2000. The researchers also found that the amount of computer usage affected student outcomes. They reported, “The evidence indicated that using their laptops [to develop and produce their writing] helped them to become better writers in general, not just better writers using laptops” (p. i).

The laptop program continues to draw positive reviews from students and teachers. In 2007, more than 70% of Maine’s middle school students said that they do “more work, more quickly, and of improved quality [and] over 80% report that the laptops increase their editing and self-correcting of their work” (Silvernail & Gritter, 2007, p. 2). A similar percentage of teachers agreed that students are “more engaged in their learning, more apt to revise and edit their work, and better able with the laptops to understand what they are learning” (p. 3).

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) also suggests that technology—in this case, word-processing software—can improve writing and also raise students’ reading achievement. The link between reading and writing is further underscored in SREB’s literacy goals for its High Schools That Work and Making Middle Grades Work models. SREB (2003) recommends that students write weekly in all classes, asserting that “students who write regularly transfer new learning into their own language, discover their voices and learn how to effectively address others” (p. 11).

In SREB’s assessment of the High Schools That Work model, seniors who completed a short weekly writing assignment improved their reading scores by 13 points over students who did similar papers once a semester. In middle school, students who were assigned one- to three-page papers once a month or more scored 15 points higher in reading achievement than students who did not complete such assignments. The difference in scores was even more pronounced when students were regularly required to revise their written work (SREB, 2003).

**How Principals Can Support Writing**

In today’s schools, writing has been described as “a prisoner of time” by the National Commission on
Writing (2003, p. 20)—not only in the scant classroom time devoted to crafting and assessing written work but also in the lack of writing instruction for teachers. What can school leaders do to free the prisoner and give writing its due? The commission also suggests that principals—along with other educational and government leaders—make the case that effective writing is essential in today’s global economy and in a vibrant, informed society. Further, teachers and administrators must “build common performance expectations by convening regular workshops on what constitutes good writing, particularly at the middle and high school levels where each student has several teachers” (p. 34). School leaders should strive to double the amount of time devoted to writing by encouraging writing across the curriculum, both in and out of school.

Studies conducted by four sites involved in Cohort III of the National Writing Project (NWP, 2008) highlighted the need for professional development that is consistent and continuous and that helps teachers see themselves as writers. Nearly 200 college- and university-based NWP programs engage in intensive professional development partnerships with schools and districts, tailoring programs to local needs and contexts. In every one of the sites studied, students performed better in the classes of teachers who participated in NWP. In 39% of the cases, there was a statistically significant difference between the students of NWP participants and a comparison group.

In one of the NWP partnerships, the University of Missouri–St. Louis provided inservice training to a group of teacher leaders in the Mehlville School District. The goal was to develop a core group that could build and sustain a literacy improvement program in the district’s middle level and high schools. Researchers measured the extent to which teachers incorporated elements of the professional development into their practice, including student choice in writing assignments, use of modeling strategies, and a range of prewriting activities. “This study suggested that when teachers experience the writing process as writers (rather than solely as readers or teachers), they are better able to support students in using the same strategies” (NWP, 2008, p. 3).

In another NWP partnership, Lehman College of City University of New York teamed up with six New York City high schools with such challenges as high poverty, low achievement, and inexperienced teachers. Teachers received one-on-one mentoring and coaching that emphasized teaching writing as a process that includes revising, editing, peer editing, and responding to students’ journals. The study found that “students’ perceptions of themselves as writers may predict future writing performance” (NWP, 2008, p. 4) and students had higher writing scores if they reported using writing in different subject areas. Another finding was that professional development appeared to have the greatest impact on students of teachers with fewer than five years of classroom experience.

**Taking Action**

Administrators can take specific action to build effective writing programs:

- Provide vision and leadership by creating and communicating about long-term writing improvement plans; committing time and resources to a writing program; enlisting teacher leaders as advocates; assessing the status of writing and of teaching in your school
- Conduct a schoolwide writing survey to address who teaches writing and whether there are shared expectations for good writing among teachers; use the survey results to help build a common vision for change
- Provide ongoing professional development that shares effective practices and good student writing samples and assignments (NWP & Nagin, 2006).

As the National Writing Project and Nagin (2006) point out,

Meeting the writing challenge requires a paradigm shift away from the limited view of writing as a discrete subject area or the exclusive domain of English language arts instruction. Because writing can support a
Students at the Center

“I was a little nervous at first about the idea of mentoring freshmen students. But I was also very excited. I could remember last year when the tables were turned, and I was in their shoes. I realized that a lasting impression is made, and I wanted to make a positive one. I had prepared questions beforehand. I wanted to know why the students had written their papers. What point were they trying to get across? Who was their audience?”

—Adriane Frazier, in the Student Stories: New Orleans Classroom Chronicle blog

As a 10th-grade student at McDonogh 35 High School in New Orleans, Adriane helped other students hone their writing skills. Her student mentoring—and the reflections it spawned—are part of an ambitious program called Students at the Center (SAC).

SAC focuses on improving student writing while developing peer-to-peer mentor relationships and building community resources. According to SAC Director Jim Randels, students who have been involved in the program can “adopt” two or three classes and assist teachers in working with younger students in writing. The mentors assist in elective writing classes, English courses, and other core subjects where writing across the curriculum is emphasized.

SAC teachers receive extensive training and support, including month-long summer institutes, half-day workshops during the school year, and monthly meetings with SAC staff. SAC teachers share this professional development with their colleagues, helping them incorporate writing and community involvement into their own subject areas.

SAC students are involved in projects that apply writing skills toward community development. They produced a newsletter for an economic development district, conducted writing workshops with parolees, and published a journal for young women. Students have won numerous writing awards, have had their work published, and even had a blog sponsored by Education Week.

Some of the work focuses on students’ relationships with their parents and some captures Hurricane Katrina stories. As the SAC blog notes, when students write about things they care deeply about and know well, they are able to more easily concentrate on the mechanics of writing. According to Jim Randels, the assignments also “allow students to engage in critical rather than cursory thinking. They aren’t just doing an assignment to show they can follow some recipe such as an introduction, three points with evidence, and a conclusion.”

Supported by grants and school district funds, SAC currently operates in two public schools in New Orleans: McDonogh 35 and Frederick Douglass. However, SAC has influenced programs in a number of states, including South Carolina, Massachusetts, New Mexico, Rhode Island, Ohio, and California.

The SAC blog is available at http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/nola Voices
high level of learning in all core subjects, it matters in any classroom where inquiry, knowledge, and expression are valued and recognized by students and teachers.

(p. 104)

Although principal leadership can foster a climate where writing is valued and practiced, all stakeholders—teachers, parents, higher education officials, administrators, and policymakers—must join in what the National Commission on Writing calls a “writing revolution.” Just as writing has helped introduce groundbreaking ideas, topple governments, change the course of history, and enlightened societies, it has the power to transform students today and in the future.

References


About the Authors

**Rhonda Barton** (bartonr@nwrel.org) is an editor/writer in the office of development and communications at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) in Portland, OR. She is the editor of the 6+1 Trait® Writing Model of Instruction & Assessment (2008, NWREL).

**Jennifer Klump** (klumpj@nwrel.org) is an education resource advisor in the office of planning and service coordination at NWREL.