

Key Research about Improving Writing in Our Schools

Students Need to Write More in All Subjects. According to a 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading report card, students in grades four, eight, and twelve who said they wrote long answers on a weekly basis scored higher than those who said they never or hardly ever did so. Yet many American schools are not giving students much time to write. On average, according to the NAEP, only 3 percent of fourth graders spent three or more hours per week on writing activities. To improve writing, schools need to begin with a realistic assessment of how much and what kind of writing students are actually asked to do.

White, S. *The NAEP 1998 Reading Report Card: National and State Highlights* (NCES 1999-479). Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, 1999, p. 10.

Teaching Writing as Process. Researchers have long questioned the assumption that instruction in grammar, usage, and punctuation by itself will yield better writing. The issue was addressed in a groundbreaking 1985 National Institute of Education report. In addition, decades of research have shown that instructional strategies such as isolated skill drills fail to improve student writing. Cognitive and sociocultural approaches to teaching and learning explored processes of composition and subsequent research found that writing could develop higher-order thinking skills: analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating, and interpreting.

National Writing Project and Carl Nagin. *Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003: p. 22.

The Reading-Writing Connection. Writing supports reading development in three ways:

- Readers and writers use the same intellectual strategies (organizing, monitoring, questioning, revising meaning).
- The reading and writing processes are similar (first you activate prior knowledge and set a purpose).
- Children use many of the same skills in both reading and writing (phonics to decode words, phonics to “sound out” spelling of words and apply spelling rules).

Tompkins, Gail E. *Literacy for the Twenty-First Century: A Balanced Approach*. (2nd ed.) Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Merrill Education, 2001.

The Changing Landscape of Writing Instruction. In the 1980s, Art Applebee studied the status of writing in American schools and found that students “wrote infrequently within a narrow range of genres for limited purposes.” Mostly students filled in blanks or completed exercises. By 1998, the NAEP found that 57% or more of teachers reported that writing process instruction and integrated reading and writing were central to their teaching, and 51% reported similar emphasis on grammar and skill-based instruction. All but some teachers reported some emphasis on both (skill-based and integrated reading and writing).

Applebee, Art. *Writing in Secondary School: English and the Content Areas*. Urbana, Ill: National Council of Teachers of English, 1981.

Applebee, Art. “Alternative Models of Writing Development.” In R. Indrisano and J.R. Squire (eds.), *Perspectives on Writing: Research, Theory, and Practice*. Newark, Del; International Reading Association, 2000, p. 91.

National Writing Assessments. The 1998 NAEP report linked students performances in grades four, eight, twelve to various home and school practices. Students who outperformed their peers *planned* (were asked to plan writing once a week or twice a month), and *wrote multiple drafts* (no relationships in grade 4 but in grades 8 and 12, more than one draft yielded higher scores). In addition, these teacher practices support higher scores in writing: *teacher-student discussion* (students in grades 8 and 12 outperformed their peers when their teachers always spoke to them about their writing), and *portfolios* (students who saved their work over time had higher writing scores in all three grades).

Effective Writing Assignments. Effective writing assignments encourage student engagement with writing processes in ways that go beyond formulaic use of prewriting, drafting, and revision. They use and balance four key elements:

- **Content and Scope** (do more than write about what you have read or experienced – students should reflect, analyze, and synthesize).
- **Organization and Development** (give students a framework for developing ideas and organizational guidelines).
- **Audience and Communication** (goes beyond “pretend” audience and gives students genuine opportunities to communicate to real audiences).
- **Engagement and Choice** (avoids pitfalls of offering students too much choice or none at all by restricting range of decisions the student is asked to make as a way to engage her more in the assignment).

Greenwald, E.A., Persky, H.R., Campbell, J.R., and Mazzeo, J. *NAEP 1998 Writing Report Card for the Nation and the States*. (NCES 1999-462). Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, 1999.

National Writing Project Classroom Practices. NWP Teachers spend far more time on writing instruction than most fourth-grade teachers across the country. On average, NWP classroom teachers spend 6.5 hours per week on writing activities. Nationally, only 3 percent of their peers spent three or more hours per week on them. Additionally, there was tremendous *breadth of writing activities* (of 45 assignments analyzed, 19 involved expository tasks, 10 were personal or family narratives, 8 were creative writing, 5 were poetry assignments, and 4 included persuasive writing); *writing strategies* also varied and were practiced daily [pair or group work (87%); peer editing (69%); completing multiple drafts (84%); and conferencing with students (78%)].

Academy for Educational Development. *National Writing Project Evaluation: NWP Classrooms: Strategies, Assignments, and Student Work. Year One Results*. New York: Academy for Educational Development, 2001, pp. 31, 36.

Professional Development. Anthony Alvarado began an 8-year tenure as superintendent in New York City in 1987, an ethnically and economically diverse district (50% of students below the poverty line). At this time his district ranked 10th in reading and 4th in math out of 32 subdistricts in NYC. By 1996, this district ranked 2nd in reading and mathematics. Here are Alvarado’s strategies for systemic change:

1. It’s about instruction...and only about instruction.
2. Instructional change is a long, multi-stage process.
3. Shared expertise is the driver of instructional change.
4. Focus on system-wide improvement.

5. Good ideas come from talented people working together.
6. Set clear expectations, then decentralize.
7. Collegiality, caring and respect.

R. F. Elmore. *Investing in Teacher Learning: Staff Development and Instructional Improvement in Community School District #2, New York City*. New York: National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, Aug. 1997, pp. 8-13.

Time and Money and Professional Development. The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) urges that at least 25 percent of teachers' time should be given over to improving their expertise and to collaboration with colleagues. Endorsing this figure, the National Association of Elementary School Principals also concurs with NSDC's recommendation that, ideally, 5-10 percent of the school budget should be allotted to professional development opportunities for teachers and instructional staff.

National Association of Elementary School Principals. *Leading Learning Communities: NAESP Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do*. Alexandria, VA.: National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2001, p.42.

National Writing Project: Teachers Teaching Teachers. Founded in 1974, the NWP focuses on improving writing and learning in our nation's schools, putting teacher expertise and networks at the heart of its professional development model. This professional network links 180 college-based sites in fifty states. They have sponsored more than 5500 professional development programs in 2001 alone, including 3000 in-service workshops for teachers, one third of which were partnerships with schools. Two key features of NWP's approach to teacher development: "a distinctive set of *social practices* that motivate teachers, making learning accessible, and build an ongoing professional community; and *networks* that organize and sustain relationships among these communities and produce new and revitalizing forms of support, commitment, and leadership."

Lieberman, A., and Wood, D.R. "The National Writing Project." *Educational Leadership*, 2002, 59(6), 40-43.

Implementing Standards. As of 2000, 49 states have established academic standards for their schools. Creating high standards, though, is not enough to improve learning in schools. Successful implementation of standards requires that teachers know how to translate standards through classroom practice that supports a high level of learning. Many teachers feel they do not. The National Assessment of Title I found that "in 1988 only 37 percent of teachers in [Title I] schools reported that they felt very well prepared to implement state of district curriculum and performance standards." (Mencken, K. "When All Meets All." *NABE News*, May-June 2001, pp. 4-7). In addition, the U.S. Department of Education found in 1998 that 70 percent of teachers in high-poverty schools received fewer than nine hours per year of professional development related to content and performance standards. Thus administrators can play substantial roles in providing resources and professional development that helps teachers get standards "off the page and into the classroom."

National Writing Project and Carl Nagin. *Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003: pp. 73-4.

