

Purposeful Community in Practice

By Vicki Urquhart

ONE OF THE BEST THINGS about working with schools and districts around the country to help launch or support their writing efforts is experiencing first-hand the positive impact that a school community has when it is focused on an outcome that matters. To illustrate, here's a story of some attention-grabbing writing scores and what a middle school in West Bend, Wisconsin, is doing about them.

Motivated to act

When the school reviewed its annual state test results, the principal and staff noted that students continued to perform well in all areas but one: language arts. With scores stagnating below the state average, the principal and staff homed in on writing. Their first act was to provide professional development and resources. Then, they decided on these three steps:

1. Develop long-term and short-term goals and put them in writing.

This was their agreed-upon goal: As a result of our schoolwide focus on writing in the content areas, students' writing scores on the state assessment will trend upward, surpassing the state average.

2. Brainstorm ideas and chart a broad plan of action.

Following an all-staff workshop on teaching writing in the content areas, the leadership team had an intense half-day working session to identify action items, next steps, persons or groups responsible, timelines, resources needed, and evaluation methods.

3. Hold ourselves accountable.

They began by developing a school writing policy. Later, the principal asked staff to provide a date and time for administration to conduct observations of their use of research-based instructional strategies, writing strategies, or both. Studies show that direct instruction of writing strategies has the most impact on improving student writing (Graham & Perin, 2007), and the writing tasks of summary writing and note taking “are two of the most powerful skills students can cultivate” (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001, p. 48).

Look closely at the details of step two above—the plan of action—to see how they proceeded:

- They provided an opportunity for stakeholders to “buy into” the writing emphasis. This meant scheduling and planning a faculty-wide activity to get everyone's attention and build excitement.
- They identified sub-groups of stakeholders who needed extra support in order to use writing effectively. Rather than focus on individuals, they targeted disciplines and brainstormed existing and needed resources, asking questions like these: Will teachers need a buddy? Are they using the school intranet? What will it take to make writing rubrics, grammar sources, and idea banks easily accessible to all staff members?
- They put it in writing. Yes, they wrote about how and why the school community values writing and acknowledged the research that connects writing to deeper content learning, problem solving, and critical thinking. (Whether it's a full-blown writing policy or a statement that you add to your school improvement plan, this step pays off.)
- They found ways to provide teachers with helpful, but not heavy-handed, reminders about direct instruction of writing strategies.
- They brainstormed new avenues for displaying and celebrating student writing schoolwide in all content areas and grade levels.

The proof of the pudding

The idea that the true value of something can only be judged when it's put to use applies to purposeful communities. This group came together to do something none of them could accomplish individually. "As a result of our last professional development day, staff members provided a date and time for administration to conduct a walk-through to observe either writing or Marzano strategies in the classroom. They also had the choice of providing a full lesson plan with student work samples attached. Overwhelmingly, staff wanted walk-throughs," reported Principal Jean Broadwater. The "proof" will be test results, of course, but in the meantime it is hearing students say, "Oh yeah, we use graphic organizers in every class" or "I'm writing summaries for all my teachers." And, with processes and agreements in place, the likelihood of success is strong. **CS**

References

- Graham, S., & Perin, D. (2007). *Writing next: Effective strategies to improve writing of adolescents in middle and high schools*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellence in Education.
- Marzano, R. J., Pickering, D. J., & Pollock, J. E. (2001). *Classroom instruction that works: Research-based strategies for increasing student achievement*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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