

# Writing Projects and School Reform: A Local Perspective

by

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All those familiar with the National Writing Project understand the Project's core beliefs: we have powerful, complementary convictions about the transformative power of literacy and of teacher leadership. When colleagues engage each other in writing projects, many come to see themselves as teacher leaders, inspired not only to transform their own practice, but also their educational communities. At the New York City Writing Project, these beliefs are firm, but the ground in which they have typically been planted — the ground of our city's schools — now shakes and shifts with the rumblings of school reform. We are affected at every level — as teachers in reforming schools, as partners in school-based professional development, as teacher educators, and as members of a visible and vocal entity with a long history in our city.

As we have been called upon more and more to support teachers in a climate of educational change,

we have needed to ask ourselves, what does a school reform movement mean to a local writing project? What, if anything, changes for us as the school system changes? How do we develop our work in ways that build upon our past and also tilt toward the future? In this piece I will describe how our writing project collaborates with and examines one facet of NYC school reform — large high schools recently broken up into small schools — and in the process raise issues about our writing project's future.

### **The New York City Reform Scene**

The New York City reform scene is a crowded, untidy house. At the time we were writing our proposal for Students at the Center (SATC) — the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest initiative in which the Philadelphia, Illinois, and New York City Writing Projects participate — we charted 22 separate reform initiatives in New York City schools. Our colleagues in other SATC cities each had one. There was so much going on, and

so little cross-initiative articulation. The chart we developed was, at the time, the only such chart in the city — the Board of Education asked us for a copy.

So using the word “reform” in New York is like showing someone a Rorschach test. It’s a loaded term these days, one which swings left and right so much that I often think I have to duck. “Reform” includes everything from vouchers for private schools to community-run freedom schools. But for purposes of this article, I use the words “school reform” to suggest what Seymour Sarason (1971) might call a disruption in the prevailing culture of school, and which he and others have detailed as dramatic changes in time, structure, habits, and size that together suggest a different view of teaching, learning, and children (Donahoe 1993; McLaughlin & Talbert 1993).

While there has been much national attention devoted to New York’s new small schools, I wish to focus my discussion of reform here on the large high schools undergoing redesign. Redesign in New York City most typically involves phasing out a large school over a number of years and gradually replacing it with smaller theme-centered schools. This restructuring process, underway now in at least five schools around the city, has been initiated by the Board of Education as a response both to the realities of continual low performance in a number of schools and to threats by the State Education Department to close the large schools that have failed most consistently.

Although the New York City Writing Project’s school-year professional development program has been working intensively in high schools for 15 years, typically in three-year relationships with particular schools, until three years ago we had not ever partnered with a redesign school. When borough superintendents began requesting that we bring the writing project’s work to such schools, we hesitated, apprehensive about being viewed as “fixing” teachers in a climate of imposed reform. But additional high schools are placed in redesign each year; if we were to continue working in our city’s schools, we needed to confront both the realities and the possibilities of these contexts and find a way to relate our work to them. Professional community is a key goal of our school-based writing project work: could a redesign environment promote empowerment and leadership among teachers in ways that improved teacher practice?

Our most senior redesign partnership, with the schools that together once were Erasmus Hall HS, is now in its third year. Through this work and subsequent work in other such places, we have learned much about the structures and staffing of redesign schools. Like most other redesign schools, Erasmus Hall has been subdivided into theme-based schools that share a building and some common space. The Erasmus schools, for example — The School of Humanities & Performing Arts, The School of Business & Technology, and The School of Science & Mathematics — are housed in different wings of the old school’s landmark building, and share the cafeteria, gym, and library. The themes are meant to give students and their families some choice in selecting a school and to serve as a framework for developing curriculum.

Another characteristic of redesign schools is that they are able to make school-based decisions about time. While one other redesign “campus” decided to follow the same bell schedule across all four schools, at Erasmus each of the three schools has its own schedule and has made its own decisions about the use of time. At the Humanities School, for example, classes are 50 minutes in length, and scheduling in the ninth grade accommodates a fair amount of team teaching in English and social studies across blocks of 100 minutes. Students leave early on Wednesdays so that the faculty can meet as a larger group and then break into teams for planning.

Redesign schools also share a number of features related to staff roles and relationships. Each theme school has a principal, but few assistant principals. Consequently, teachers participate in school governance, coordinate much of the administrative detail, and in some cases play a role in supervising and supporting their colleagues. At Erasmus Humanities, for example, staff are experimenting with peer coaching, but the principal also observes most teachers, and outside supervisors visit the school to review new teachers at regular intervals.

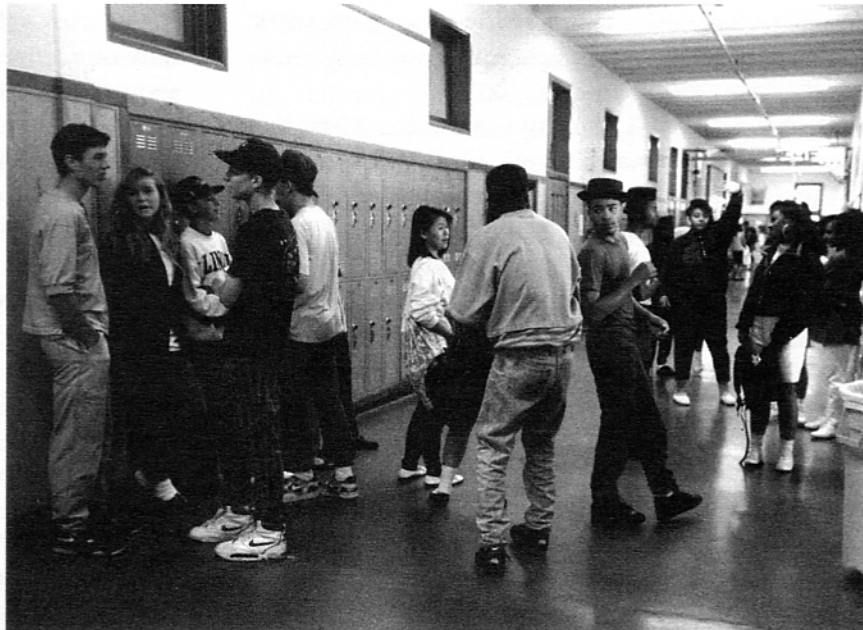
An important feature of the redesign schools, in contrast with New York City’s new small schools, is that staff and administrators must work together to reimagine schooling in places with a previous history and culture. Erasmus, like other redesign schools, was required to keep a percentage of the original staff before restructuring, some of whom are cynical and hostile to the change. Working side by side with the

veterans is a significant percentage of teachers fairly new to the classroom and more culturally diverse. Some of the newer teachers may be more open to and energetic about reform, but are still trying to learn their craft, often without much pre-service preparation. The differences in age, perspective, experience, and culture complicate discussions of school vision, governance, student expectations, and instruction.

Finally, I need to make clear here that the writing project is not the only professional development group that works in the redesign schools. Not surprisingly these schools often house multiple such groups. This is because, as most of the restructured schools have been designated as failing and need to demonstrate improvement in student outcomes, district administrators have sent in their staff developers and invited in outside professional development groups to work with teachers to address these problems. Often, a “more is more” philosophy prevails without attention to whether or how the outside resources invited into the schools might be compatible with each other and with the school’s needs. Through the Students at the Center initiative, the writing project and three additional professional development groups work in the three Erasmus schools. Also contributing to professional development at the Erasmus schools are an on-site United Federation of Teachers teacher center, Outward Bound, and district-based staff developers. While there is some coordination among these entities, there is not nearly enough.

### **Our Work at Erasmus Humanities**

Our work at Erasmus Humanities, led by teacher consultant Alan Stein, a high school history teacher released from his school to work full-time with the writing project, is teaching us much about the role we can and do play in reform. What follows here is a description of how we began our work at the Erasmus schools, with a specific focus on Erasmus Humanities, how that work evolved over three years in the school, and what we are discovering from it.



We have learned over the years that the school context influences the kind of success we can have in our professional development work, and redesign contexts were new to us. So at the outset, in addition to providing our typical school-based program — professional development seminars and on-site support focused on teachers’ classroom practice — Project Director Linette Moorman and I urged Alan, as a writing project pioneer in such a context, to participate in and learn as much as he could about teachers’ work outside (as well as within) the classroom.

We knew that teachers in such schools often take on multiple roles; they serve on policy councils, curriculum committees, and the like. We were eager to learn through Erasmus whether the writing project might influence and assist classrooms and committees, thereby encouraging a professional community that would lead simultaneously to the development of practice and the structure-supports that nurture it. So Alan spent a lot of his early time at Erasmus Humanities asking if he could come to meetings, and then observing and listening to teachers talk about school and classroom issues such as classroom management, student discipline, and students’ literacy development. We also asked Alan, a former union activist, if he could put aside his carefully-nurtured suspicion of administrators and make a link to the principal, Carolyn Wagner. Luckily, both Ms. Wagner and Alan quickly saw the ways in which her vision for the school, “where everyone is a teacher, a learner, and a



leader," intersected with the writing project's work, and a solid collaboration was born.

It was slow going at first. But some of the things that made it hard also made it work. On one day, early in the first semester, the teachers participating in the on-site seminar all arrived late, having just endured a day-long inspection from state monitors and district administrators. Teachers were crushed; Alan rightly saw that something had to be done. He put the agenda aside and asked teachers to write about the day and about the pressure they'd been experiencing. They wrote of the school's past attempts at reform, their questions about their own impact on students, and the negative perceptions of their work held by others. The time they spent hearing each other's writing helped establish the writing project seminar as a safe, protected space in a school under siege.

The seminar became a place to consider simultaneously issues related to the teaching of writing and to the ethos of the school. When Alan and teachers conducted close descriptions of students' work (Carini et al. 1986), everyone learned something about teachers' assignments and about the support students need to grow as writers. But out of these experiences, teachers also began to construct a new perspective on the students, a new view of them as complex thinkers and writers. And later, when teachers in a workshop pursued the theme of immigration, writing about and sharing their own families' immigration experiences linked them to their students — a largely Caribbean immigrant population — in ways that encouraged a greater awareness of and appreciation for who the students are.

Outside of the seminar and the classrooms, Alan supported the teacher-leaders of several committees. Working with a writing project participant from the school, he organized and facilitated a writing and response group so that a core group of teachers could draft and publish a school constitution. He initiated reflective-practice study groups — at once an effective formative evaluation structure in redesign schools and a generative form of professional development where teachers brought specific curriculum projects or student work for review by their colleagues. And he met with representatives from other professional development groups to determine where they might collaborate in the interest of these students, teachers, and schools.

Alan's work at Erasmus Humanities altered dramatically our sense of what our school-based work was about. Like our other on-site teacher consultants, Alan worked with teachers on the teaching of writing and reading. He assisted with history-class book groups, a student publication in a Shakespeare class, and writing-to-learn strategies in a government class. He helped teachers present on staff development days. But Alan also participated in the school's coordinating committee, its theme infusion committee, and its school-based planning group. He reached out via the writing project network to teacher consultants in exemplary small schools and arranged for Erasmus teachers to visit. "I've come to be recognized as a major resource," he wrote in his journal during his second year in the school. "I provide materials, I make suggestions, I provide readings, I provide contacts outside the school. And this is done in a collegial, egalitarian manner." Alan has extended the notion of teachers-teaching-teachers from classrooms to school governance and policy forums. In this journal entry, he describes his support of teachers involved in school-based planning:

*I've attended all but one of the school-based planning [SBP] meetings, and I've met with Lisa to discuss some of the problems I've noticed last year and now. There tends to be limited participation, domination by a few, and a too widespread feeling among a minority that this is just another reinvention of the wheel, an administrative fiat that has nothing to do with them. Out of these discussions with Lisa has come the formation of a coordinating committee that has taken up the issue of how to make SBP more invitational and more effective and more directly related to teachers' needs and interests... Lisa chaired the first meeting... and asked the participants to write about a SBP team experience, either positive or negative. This was then shared, and the discussion moved on to what was needed to improve the process, and what actions needed to be taken to accomplish the aims.*

An essential notion for us in our writing-to-learn work — that writing helps to make our thinking recoverable — transferred to Alan's policy work in the ways in which writing began to be used by teachers in their school-based planning and curriculum committees.

The changes in Alan's role, and later in the roles of other on-site teacher consultants in redesign schools,

necessitated a change in how our writing project site supported them and further integrated a school reform emphasis across all our work. In line with the writing project's growing emphasis on documentation, Alan and other on-site teacher consultants keep journals of their work, which they share in weekly meetings for each other's observations and advice.

The writing project interest in reform has moved beyond our work at individual sites. As a writing project continuity program, Associate Director Ed Osterman has led a Saturday reading group for teacher consultants focused on school reform; teacher consultants have read a number of provocative pieces, among them, *The Dreamkeepers* (Ladson-Billings), *What's Worth Fighting For in Our Schools* (Fullan), *Other People's Children* (Delpit), *Beyond Discipline* (Kohn), and the New Standards Project's materials, and have discussed the implications of these ideas for their own work as teachers and writing project teacher consultants, and for the school reform community in New York City. Those teacher consultants who are themselves leaders of reforming schools have coordinated advanced summer institutes focused on leadership for literacy. And, across projects in the Institute for Literacy Studies, where the NYC Writing Project is housed, we have collectively considered issues of entry into schools, ways of working alongside teachers without taking over, and approaches to documentation and group facilitation. All of this work serves as a resource to Alan and the other redesign pioneers.

### What We're Learning

The lessons of our work are ongoing. Here is some of what we've discovered.

1. The writing project remains a powerful model for teacher development. As we all know, writing and sharing practice are transformative experiences for teachers. These elements are still the irreducible core of our work. Using that core, Alan and others, at their sites, are building a cadre of teachers willing and able to lead, teachers whose work is visible to their administrators and colleagues. These are the teachers who serve as co-leaders for our seminars at these sites. Further, having key teachers from restructuring schools participate in our summer invitational has become an essential piece — a luxurious opportunity for professional growth and collegial support.

2. What we've all learned together as writing projects about good professional development has broad applicability beyond the classroom. We are applying our values about writing, learning, and teacher knowledge, our facilitation skills, and our specific ways of working to committee and policy work. We've seen the writing project help to develop at Erasmus Humanities the habits and rituals that nurture a new culture. One small example that's made a world of difference: As Alan's earlier journal entry augured, most governance and curriculum meetings now include some writing, are facilitated in ways that allow everyone to be heard, and are documented. In the spirit of teachers teaching teachers, leadership of meetings has been decentralized and is now the responsibility of teacher facilitators. Each team on school-based planning keeps a ledger that collects the writing that comes out of meetings — minutes, notes, ideas for proposals. And this work proceeds with the support, guidance, and participation of the principal, the "keeper of the vision" (Louis, Marks, & Kruse 1996).

3. The expertise of writing project teachers, celebrated and promoted by our sites throughout the country, can make a significant difference in the quality of some redesign schools and, by extension, of any reforming school that places its trust in teachers. Our work at Erasmus Humanities seems consistent with the growing number of studies focusing on the effects of professional community; these studies suggest links between the quality of teachers' interactions with each other and outcomes for students (Louis, Marks, & Kruse 1996; Lord 1994). Teachers who work with Alan at Erasmus Humanities are becoming the leaders of the school. In their commitment to sharpening their own practice, they are models and resources for their colleagues. And in their emerging roles as coordinators of site-based writing project seminars, team facilitators, and school planners, they shape and sustain the professional community that both embodies and enacts the school's vision.

### Looking Ahead

We are taking an inquiry stance with this work, and questions are emerging from it. Here are three:

First, as we participate more in the policy life of the school, focusing on the contexts that support practice, we by necessity must spend less time focusing on practice itself. What is gained or lost in this realignment of our role?

Second, as we join with restructuring schools living under a State microscope, how do we define the terms of our own accountability in ways that both respect the school's circumstances and interrogate the State's measures? Our vision of school for teachers and students is much broader than student achievement tests alone will demonstrate. How do we negotiate external pressures while we raise internal voice?

Third, as we see the power of the writing project's influence within a redesign context, how do we codify, learn from, and draw attention to this work? Identifying the elements of our success seems essential, but we must do so without becoming seen as yet another recipe-based school reform model.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the New York City Writing Project. Some of us who participated in its early summer institutes and have remained involved know firsthand the relationship of writing projects to school reform. One of our liveliest discussions over the years has focused on whether our role in professional development was to serve the school or to support individual teachers. Now, in the last three years, we have found ourselves moving away from that oppositional debate. We are developing double vision — with our eyes at once on the school and on the teachers. It's been challenging work, and we've been changed by it.

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