

**NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT**

**LOCAL SITE RESEARCH INITIATIVE REPORT**

**Cohorts II and III**

**2004–2005, 2005–2006**

Summary Report of National Results

**JANUARY 2008**

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## **LOCAL SITE RESEARCH INITIATIVE SUMMARY – Cohorts II and III (2004–2006)**

### **I. OVERVIEW**

This report summarizes the activities and results of the second and third years (2004–2005 and 2005–2006) of the Local Site Research Initiative (LSRI) of the National Writing Project (NWP). LSRI is a growing national portfolio of locally defined research projects that study the effectiveness of several aspects of the writing project model and its impact on students in a range of contexts, each of which features intensive professional development partnerships between NWP sites and schools or school districts. The studies summarized in this report were conducted by six NWP sites: Gateway Writing Project (University of Missouri, St. Louis), Mississippi Writing/Thinking Institute (Mississippi State University), New York City Writing Project (Lehman College), South Coast Writing Project (University of California, Santa Barbara), Sunbelt Writing Project (Auburn University, Alabama), and Southern Nevada Writing Project (University of Nevada, Las Vegas). This report summarizes each site's research and identifies important learnings that derive from the studies.

A central feature of the NWP model is that the specific design of professional development programs varies according to local needs and reform priorities, as well as local school conditions and contexts. While the design and delivery of services is negotiated with local education authorities, all writing project sites emphasize common core principles of effective instruction and professional growth and development for teachers. Our goal is to develop a growing body of research examining local professional development programs based on these common core principles, in order to illuminate teacher practices and student achievement in writing across a range of grade levels, schools, and local contexts.

Six NWP sites were selected, through a request-for-proposal process, to participate in LSRI Cohort II in 2004–2005. Four of those sites were subsequently invited to submit proposals to participate in Cohort III (2005–2006). Each study was designed to investigate how key components of the site's program activities contributed to changes in teaching practices as well as to student learning and achievement in writing. The proposals were evaluated—by NWP staff and by a panel of distinguished scholar-researchers—for focus, content, and methodological rigor and appropriateness, as well as for feasibility and the capacity of the site to successfully execute the research. Each site received financial assistance as well as extensive technical help from the national NWP office, to study the effects of its program.

### **II. SUMMARY OF LSRI RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS**

Collectively, the studies covered a broad range of grade levels (3–12); diverse regions of the country, including rural, urban, and suburban areas; and students with diverse economic, language, and racial and ethnic backgrounds; and they capture data about writing project programs incorporating various kinds and levels of teacher participation.

The approaches to research in each of the funded sites were designed to address the principles for scientific research in education developed by the National Research Council (National Research Council 2002). While four studies employed various methods of data collection and analysis, they all employed quasi-experimental, comparative designs to enable attribution of observed results. The Gateway, New York City (NYCWP), South Coast (SCWriP) and Sunbelt studies matched individual teachers and their classrooms. The Southern Nevada Family Writing Project (FWP) matched program and comparison students. The Mississippi Writing/Thinking Institute (MWTI) study matched program and comparison schools.

All the studies analyzed, at minimum, pre/post student writing samples. All student writing was coded, with identifying information removed (e.g., site of origin, program or comparison group, pre- or posttest), and then evaluated at an annual independent national scoring conference. NWP provided a rigorous evaluation framework for evaluating students' writing, including "anchor papers"—samples exemplifying each level of achievement—along with descriptive commentary. Each writing sample was scored using NWP's Analytic Writing Continuum (AWC), a rubric adapted from the *6+1 Traits of Writing* (Culham 2003). The AWC rubric covered six specific attributes of writing: *content*, *structure*, *stance*, *sentence fluency*, *diction*, and *conventions*. In addition, each writing sample received an overall holistic score.

The scorers participated in six hours of initial training. Their scoring was calibrated to a criterion level of performance, and then recalibrated following major breaks (meals and overnight). Overall, reliabilities (measured as interrater agreement, defining agreement as two scores that were identical or within one single score point of each other) ranged from 88% to 94%, with a median across all scores of 91%.

### **III. SUMMARY OF RESULTS**

#### **A. Overall Results for Student Writing Performance**

Across sites both years, in every one of the comparisons, the results favor students in classes of NWP-participating teachers. Table 1 summarizes student writing performance across Cohort II studies (2004–2005) and Cohort III studies (2005–2006). Results are shown for each instance, comparing each NWP group to its comparison group on each of the six attributes of writing and on the overall holistic score. Upward-pointing triangles denote findings favoring the NWP. Solid triangles indicate statistical significance.

**Table 1: Summary of Student Writing Performance by Site and Cohort**

	Content	Structure	Stance	Sentence Fluency	Diction	Conventions	Holistic Score
Gateway II	▲	▲	▲	▲	△	▲	▲
Gateway III	△	△	▲	▲	△	△	△
MWTI II	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲
MWTI III	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲
NYCWP II	▲	▲	▲	△	▲	▲	▲
NYCWP III	△	△	▲	△	△	△	△
SCWriP II	△	△	△	△	△	△	△
SCWriP III	△	△	△	△	▲	△	△
Sunbelt WP II	▲	▲	▲	▲	△	△	▲
SNWP II	△	△	△	△	▲	△	△

▲ - Favorable Results – Significant; △ - Favorable Results – Not Significant; ○ - No Difference; ▽ - Unfavorable Results – Not Significant; ▼ - Unfavorable Results – Significant

The results, taken across sites and across years, indicate a consistent pattern favoring the NWP. For every measured attribute of writing and in every site, the improvement of students taught by NWP-participating teachers exceeded that of students in classes whose teachers were not participants. Moreover, in 36 of the 70 contrasts (51%), the differences between NWP participants’ students and comparison students were statistically significant.

## B. Summary of Research and Results by Site

### Gateway Writing Project, University of Missouri, Saint Louis:

#### *Building a District-Based Secondary Writing Program Through the National Writing Project Model*

This study examines the effects of a professional development program conducted in the Mehlville School District near St. Louis, Missouri. Gateway Writing Project (GWP) provided the inservice program, which sought to develop a core group of teacher-leaders who could build and sustain a literacy improvement program at the middle and high school levels.

The study compares data from communication arts teachers and their students in grades 6–11. A total of 17 program teachers—8 from 2004–2005 and 9 from 2005–2006—participated in the study. The 10 comparison group teachers did not participate in the GWP professional development program. The quasi-experimental study design matched teachers and students to ensure comparability on a number of qualitative and quantitative demographic and performance variables. Data included interviews and classroom observations, as well as student writing samples. Program effectiveness was measured in terms of the teachers’ classroom use of writing process skills and strategies, as well as students’ performance in writing.

Program group students’ achievement increased overall more than that of comparison students, according to both the holistic assessment and the component analysis of the six analytic elements. These differences were statistically significant for *stance* and *sentence fluency*. Qualitative analysis suggests that participating teachers implemented a range of skills and

strategies taught in the professional development program in their classrooms; key features of program teachers' classroom practice included student choice in writing assignments, use of modeling strategies, and a range of prewriting activities. This study suggests that when teachers experience the writing process as writers (rather than solely readers or teachers), they are better able to support students in using the same strategies.

**Mississippi Writing/Thinking Institute, Mississippi State University:**

***The Effect of MWTI Professional Development on the Writing Achievement of Elementary Students***

MWTI's 2004–2005 research compares teacher practices and student outcomes for ninth graders in two high schools, one of which participated in MWTI professional development. The 2005–2006 research compares teacher practices and student outcomes for students in grades 3, 4, and 5 in two elementary schools, one of which participated in MWTI professional development. The research employed a quasi-experimental design, assessing the writing of program and comparison groups of students using pre/ post writing assessments. The 2004–2005 sample included 298 program and 157 comparison students along with 5 teachers in each group. The 2005–2006 sample included 26 teachers and 435 students in the program school and 16 teachers and 217 students in the comparison school.

Research questions focused on the differences in improvement in students' writing between *pre* and *post* assessments. Teachers' practices in both schools were analyzed according to writing instruction strategies implemented in classrooms and each teacher's overall degree of implementation of the strategies that had been presented in the NWP professional development. Additionally, the study examined the correlation of prominent- and syntactic-feature scores of students' writing with their overall writing-assessment scores.

Student growth in writing between *pre* and *post* assessments was significantly greater for the program students. Even though comparison students scored higher than program students on the *pre* assessment, program students significantly outperformed comparison students on all aspects of the *post* assessment—the holistic score as well as analytic scores for *content*, *structure*, *stance*, *sentence fluency*, *diction*, and *conventions*. The teaching practices of teachers participating in the writing project professional development were more process based and student centered than those of teachers in the comparison group. In the 2005–2006 study, program group teachers' practices included more student choice, teacher and peer response, variety of revision strategies, and publication opportunities outside the classroom. Teachers with the highest implementation of NWP teaching strategies fostered the greatest growth in student writing. Findings also show statistically significant correlations between certain prominent features and the analytic writing attribute scores. This study contributes to our understanding of the teaching of writing and to the design of professional development.

**New York City Writing Project, Lehman College, City University of New York:**  
*The Impact of the New York City Writing Project: Teacher and Student Outcomes of a Professional Development Model for Improving the Teaching of Writing*

This two-year study investigates the impact of a partnership between the New York City Writing Project (NYCWP) and six high schools in large urban districts where challenges include poverty, low student achievement, inexperienced teachers, and increasing demands for high-stakes testing. The research examines, by comparing data from two sets of teachers and their students in grades 9–12, how NYCWP professional development supports teachers' growth and affects student writing. Seventeen program group teachers participated in the NYCWP professional development program at their school sites; the four comparison group teachers—from a school with similar demographics—did not have access to NYCWP professional development. The analysis of teachers' growth was based on interviews and surveys about instructional practices and attitudes. Students' growth was measured by pre/post assessments of student writing samples.

Program students' scores generally increased across writing prompt administrations, whereas the scores of students in the comparison group either decreased or stayed the same. A statistically significant difference favoring the program group was shown in the specific writing element of *stance*. In addition, results suggest that students' perceptions of themselves as writers may predict future writing performance. Also, students who reported that they sometimes find writing to be frustrating tended to do better on the writing samples. Finally, students did better on the writing samples the more often they reported using writing in other subject areas across the curriculum.

Teachers in both the program and comparison groups developed their teaching practices during the study period, suggesting the positive impact of one-on-one mentoring and direct coaching. (Although comparison group teachers did not have any exposure to NYCWP, all of them worked to some degree with a literacy teacher-mentor from another university.) Program group teachers adopted a student-centered pedagogy in a variety of subject areas. All the program group teachers adopted an approach that teaches writing as a process including revising, editing, peer editing, and responding to student journal-writing. Students of teachers who were exposed to NYCWP for more than one year but had less than five years of teaching experience made the most improvement in writing. This suggests that the NYCWP professional development model is most effective for teachers early in their teaching career, and that professional development needs to be consistent and continuous in order to be effective.

**South Coast Writing Project, University of California, Santa Barbara:**  
*Evaluating IIMPaC: Teacher and Student Outcomes Through a Professional Development Program in the Teaching of Writing*

The South Coast Writing Project's (SCWriP) multiyear study examines the effects of a professional development program, IIMPaC, focused on the teaching of writing. (IIMPaC is an acronym for five elements of the program: *inquiry*, *inservice* workshops, *models*, *practice*, and *coaching*.) IIMPaC operates in partnership with low-performing schools that serve low-income populations with a substantial proportion of English language learners. The 2005–2006 research

focuses on eight language arts teachers of grades 3–8 and the students in their classes, from two schools that participated in IIMPaC: a middle school and one of the elementary schools that feeds it. Nine teachers and their students from matched schools provide comparison data. Data used to assess the effects of participation in IIMPaC on teachers' classroom practices include surveys, interviews, classroom observations, and collections of teacher and student work. The program's impact on student attitudes was measured by a survey adapted from an established measure of writing apprehension (Daly and Miller 1975), administered in a pre/post fashion. The program's impact on students' writing performance was measured by timed writing prompts drawn from an established archive of writing assessments, administered in a pre/post fashion and independently scored at a national conference. From *pre* to *post* assessments, student writing scores in the program group improved more than those of the comparison group across all measured attributes, and improvement was statistically significant in the attribute of *diction*.

Teachers in both groups used a common set of terms (e.g., *prewriting*, *revision*, and *editing*) to talk with students about writing process. However, the two groups of teachers used these common terms to refer to practices that at times differed greatly between the SCWriP group and the comparison group. Similarly, the two groups differed in the way they framed genres of writing, offering them either as preset and rigid forms prescribed by teachers and test-makers, or as socially situated tools for communication in particular rhetorical situations. Overall, teachers in the program group demonstrated more ownership over their classroom curriculum than the teachers in the comparison group, who showed a tendency to adhere closely to the textbook program. As a result, students in the program teachers' classrooms were more often positioned as writers facing authentic communicative tasks.

### **Sunbelt Writing Project, Auburn University:**

#### ***Teachers' Writing Lives and Student Achievement in Writing***

This 2004–2005 study focuses on several teacher practices (teachers' own writing lives, ways of organizing the classroom, and ongoing involvement in professional development activities) in relation to their students' achievement in writing. Participants included 17 teacher-consultants affiliated with three Alabama NWP sites, and 15 closely matched comparison teachers, all of whom taught secondary English language arts. Teachers' survey reports were analyzed in relation to their students' performance on pre/post writing assessments.

The research builds on literature examining the NWP's construction of writing as an "uncertain" and "nonroutine" task, as well as literature on how classroom work arrangements affect student writing. The study asks whether teachers who themselves have extensive writing lives are more likely to view writing as an uncertain, rather than routine, task; whether this understanding (which is supported by NWP professional development) would lead teachers to establish classroom environments where writing is taught as a nonroutine composing process, more than as a restricted, routine task; and whether these factors might predict student writing achievement.

Participating NWP teachers reported more extensive writing lives than comparison teachers. In addition, the teacher-consultants' students showed significantly greater achievement in writing than the students of non-TCs on several nonroutine dimensions of writing (*quality of ideas*, *voice*, and a holistic score), and these gains did not occur at the expense of more routine

dimensions of writing (e.g., *vocabulary* and *conventions*). Results suggest a significant interaction effect between the writing lives of teachers who participate in intensive and ongoing NWP activities, and their students' achievement in what can be argued to be the most uncertain aspects of writing: holistic writing quality and the quality of ideas. These findings are consistent with the NWP's assertion that teachers' own writing is essential to the professional development of teachers of writing. Further, the positive and statistically significant association between participating teacher-consultants' level of ongoing NWP work—beyond the summer institute—and their students' writing achievement provides descriptive data consistent with the assertion that this facet of the NWP professional development model is a way of improving schools.

### **Southern Nevada Writing Project:**

#### ***Through the Lens of the Family Writing Project***

This 2004–2005 study documents the effects of participation in the Family Writing Project (FWP), a family literacy program offered by the Southern Nevada Writing Project (SNWP). The FWP provides opportunities for students, parents, and teachers from the highly diverse and transient Las Vegas community to come together outside of the school day to write about matters important to their lives. FWP teacher-facilitators engage family members in writing and art activities, discussions, publishing, and community projects. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of participation in the FWP on 1) students' achievement in writing and attitudes about writing, and 2) teachers' practices (including their approaches to teaching writing and their relationships with students and families).

The study employed a pre/post quasi-experimental design, matching individual students to examine differences between two groups: 21 middle school students who participated in the FWP and were also students in FWP teacher-consultants' classrooms, and a comparison group of carefully matched students from a school of similar size and demographics with no FWP involvement or other instruction from SNWP teacher-consultants. Data collected in 2004–2005 included student writing samples from three points in time; pre/post student surveys; and interviews of teachers, students, and parents.

FWP students demonstrated greater growth in each of six writing attributes (*content, structure, stance, sentence fluency, diction, and conventions*) as well as on a holistic assessment. This difference was statistically significant for the program group in the area of *word choice*. FWP students liked writing more than comparison students (and used it to understand their feelings), and their positive attitudes were sustained over time at the FWP sites. Interviews with the FWP teacher-consultants documented changes in their classroom practices as well as in their understanding of the need to establish and value relationships with students and parents.

## **IV. LESSONS LEARNED AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FIELD**

Beyond the results consistently favoring the NWP participants, the LSRI studies highlight two major design challenges facing researchers of complex, multisite professional development programs. First, identifying appropriate comparison groups is challenging. Comparison groups may vary considerably; the level of latent knowledge and skill among comparison group teachers can be quite high. Assessing the comparative effects of NWP programs was often a matter of



comparing those programs to a heterogeneous set of programs in which the level of exposure to professional development and related ideas and practices varied considerably among comparison schools and districts.

A second challenge lies in detecting and describing differences in classroom practice. Teachers' self-report data suggest widespread involvement in instructional practices like prewriting, drafting, and editing. However, careful analyses of interviews, classroom observations, and students' writing point to more nuanced differences in practice. More sensitive data collection measures required a considerable investment, and thus Cohort III sites were more successful than previous cohorts at collecting and analyzing data that allowed them to "unpack" classroom practice. Revised interview protocols and survey instruments as well as analytic tools for interpreting the data continue to be added to the NWP archive.

In addition to these methodological lessons, the portfolio of LSRI studies makes significant contributions to the field of writing instruction, including the following:

- *LSRI provided a significant opportunity to build NWP site leaders' capacity to conduct research about the impact of their own work in relation to student outcomes.*
- *The large-scale scoring of student writing provides an opportunity to add to our professional knowledge base about writing assessment by exploring related basic research questions.* Four studies grew out of the national scoring conference, including a study of the effects of scoring order on holistic and analytic writing assessment scores, a comparison of full-scale and forced-choice scoring methods, an analysis of product form and scoring, and an analysis of scorer approaches to evaluating *voice (stance)*.
- *The NWP National Scoring Conference enhanced teacher-readers' understanding of the elements of student writing and of students' capacities to master them.*
- *The LSRI studies contributed knowledge and procedures that will inform the conduct of future research.* Procedures for assessing classroom practices, developed in LSRI sites, will inform the measurement of instructional practice in a national evaluation. The NWP Analytic Writing Continuum Assessment System has proven effective as a measurement tool for assessing growth in student writing.

In these ways, the LSRI studies go beyond the typical contribution of evaluation studies by adding to the national knowledge base about the teaching and assessment of writing.

## V. CONCLUSION

The studies summarized in this report uniformly suggest the positive impact of the NWP programming they investigated: students in NWP teachers' classrooms experience consistent and positive results. Further, the studies document improvements in participating teachers' practices (documentation made possible by the increased sophistication of classroom data collection and analysis tools employed by LSRI researchers), providing evidence that differences in teaching practice can account for student outcomes. Finally, the LSRI studies confirm that NWP

programs—while varied by context—maintain a commitment to high-quality professional development.

## **VI. REFERENCES**

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