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The Writing Leadership Project: A Partnership to Produce Effective Writing Teachers

Dorothy Willis, Bellarmine University, and Jean Wolph, University of Louisville

Abstract

This article describes a two-year university and school district collaboration to provide English/language arts teachers of grades 5, 8, and 12 with long-term professional development and follow-up support. The Writing Leadership Project, initiated to help teachers meet demands of high-stakes writing assessment, was designed to improve writing instruction and develop peer leaders. Based upon analysis of teacher surveys and participant interviews as well as analysis of results in on-demand writing tests that are part of the state’s accountability testing system, this partnership produced the following positive outcomes: 1) improvement of teachers’ knowledge and skills in best practice writing instruction, 2) increase in participants’ confidence to serve as writing mentors, 3) gains in students’ writing achievement scores, 4) improved retention of writing teachers, and 5) establishment of a collegial university-school district network to continue collaboration and research in effective writing strategies.

Introduction

In The Testing Trap, Hillocks (2002) reported that although mandatory state writing assessments have “a significant impact on what is taught about composition in the K–12 classroom,” these assessments themselves do not produce effective teachers of writing (p. viii). For writing instruction to change and improve, Hillocks concluded, classroom teachers need quality professional development and follow-up support (p. ix).

The Writing Leadership Project, a collaborative partnership between the Jefferson County (Kentucky) Public Schools and the University of Louisville Writing Project, was designed to change the knowledge, practices, and attitudes of teachers responsible for state writing assessments by providing quality professional development and support. Writing Leadership Project (WLP) partners shared a common interest in developing effective teachers of writing. Teachers struggling with accountability for writing performance wanted to understand how to help students succeed. Both school and district administrators in the Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) confronting pressures of high-stakes writing assessment wanted to find better ways to support teacher improvement; and the Louisville Writing Project (LWP), whose mission is to improve P–16 writing instruction through a “teachers teaching teachers” model, wanted to find new ways to work with writing teachers as they developed their practices. The Writing Leadership Project united stakeholders who had disparate needs and
perspectives. WLP enabled us to learn from one another’s strengths and develop new practices as we tackled common problems. Complementary needs brought school, district, and university personnel together to cocreate a unique model for developing capacity in writing instruction.

The collaborative design of the Writing Leadership Project was influenced by literature on professional development, which is often harsh in its assessment of traditional in-service and replete with proposals for change (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Hirsch & Killion, 2009; Stein & Coburn, 2008). Matthew B. Miles (1995) of the Center for Policy Research critiqued the state of in-service education as

everything that a learning environment shouldn’t be: radically underresourced, brief, not sustained, designed for “one size fits all,” imposed rather than owned, lacking any intellectual coherence, treated as a special add-on event rather than as part of a natural process. . . . [It] leaves its participants more cynical and no more knowledgeable, skilled, or committed than before. (p. vii)

The Writing Leadership Project was initiated by three educators who had participated in the National Writing Project (NWP), a nationwide professional development network to promote excellence in the teaching of writing. Experiences in NWP influenced our awareness of addressing teachers’ learning needs, the importance of honoring teachers’ professional backgrounds and classroom experiences to inform practice, the value of inviting teachers to identify and address their own teaching problems, and the necessity of tailoring professional development to the contexts of classroom teaching. Teachers interested in developing their knowledge of writing instruction and in serving as peer leaders were invited — not mandated — to participate. The school district and university collaborated to furnish resources — financial and personal — to promote teacher change over time. WLP was planned for year-long collaboration in response to findings that short-term experiences rarely have long-term effects (National Writing Project, 2010).

School District’s Need for Partnership

Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS), the nation’s eighth largest school system, serves 150 schools and 97,000 plus students in Louisville, Ky. When this partnership was conceived, Dottie Willis served as the JCPS writing specialist, and along with only one writing resource teacher, was responsible for district-wide professional development in writing. Willis described the school district’s “urgent need” for initiating a partnership with the University of Louisville Writing Project:

Our huge urban district includes both the highest as well as lowest performing schools in Kentucky. With teachers’ needs for professional development in writing just as diverse as the schools themselves, the challenge of offering quality training to support all teachers in portfolio development and writing assessment as mandated by the Kentucky Education Reform Act seemed like a mission impossible.

To help accomplish this daunting mission to provide training in the teaching of writing, the school district relied heavily upon leadership from writing cluster leaders. This title was given to one full-time language arts teacher who represented each school in our county-wide professional development sessions. Following a train-the-trainer model, after cluster leaders engaged in our district in-service sessions, they were then expected to deliver writing training to teachers within their schools. While JCPS cluster leaders’ service was crucial, this challenging role was also time-consuming. As a result, turnover rate among the school-based writing leaders was high. In fact, many were actually inexperienced teachers who accepted this extra duty only because teachers with more seniority had refused.

Another driving motivation for our school district-university collaboration was a major change in Kentucky’s high stakes writing tests at all grade levels. Before 2006, on-demand writing tests had constituted only about 14 percent of each school’s writing score, while portfolio scores accounted for 86 percent of the total writing index. Suddenly, performance on 60-minute on-demand writing
tests became equally weighted in accountability (50 percent) to performance on writing portfolios developed over time. Furthermore, teacher accountability for writing performance also shifted. Elementary on-demand testing was moved from fourth to fifth grade, and middle school on-demand tests were moved from seventh to eighth grade. In many cases, our district’s fifth and eighth grade teachers, who had not previously faced writing accountability, lacked expertise and experience to prepare students for high-stakes writing exams.

In addition, our state changed high school writing assessment: 1) grade 12 on-demand writing tests, always administered near the end of senior year, were suddenly moved to first semester, and 2) a new on-demand writing test was added. This new test was actually a 60-minute literacy assessment requiring all seniors to read a short text and then write an appropriate letter, editorial, article, or speech in response. As a result of new test expectations, grade 11 English teachers, not previously held accountable for developing students’ on-demand writing skills, would now be expected to assume some of this responsibility. Thus, in 2006, the number of teachers in the Jefferson County Public Schools who needed professional development in writing instruction and assessment had more than doubled.

**Assistant Superintendent Advocates Collaboration**

How could JCPS possibly increase district training and school support to help more teachers meet new challenges from our state’s high-stakes writing accountability system? Joe Burks Jr., JCPS assistant superintendent of high schools, proposed a positive solution: “Since the Louisville Writing Project has played a major role in producing so many of our district’s outstanding writing teachers for the past 25 years, we should form a partnership with LWP and the University of Louisville. It will be a win-win venture for everyone involved.” After only one meeting with university officials, Burks and the Jefferson County Public Schools committed to cosponsor a two-year professional development project with the University of Louisville Writing Project, recognized as an exemplary site of the National Writing Project. Christened the Writing Leadership Project (WLP), our partnership would be cooperatively implemented by Dottie Willis, JCPS writing specialist, and Jean Wolph, Louisville Writing Project director.

In addition to personnel support, the University of Louisville offered tuition remission as an incentive to project participants desiring to earn graduate credit. The university also employed a doctoral student to conduct an independent program evaluation. Wolph, the Louisville Writing Project director, reflected on this project’s significance to her university:

As a National Writing Project site, the focus of LWP is to improve writing instruction in schools through development of teacher leaders who write, read professional literature, examine their practice, and share their new knowledge with colleagues. Our Writing Leadership Project is an ideal way to demonstrate university service and support to the state’s largest school district.

Three JCPS assistant superintendents nominated schools for project participation based upon their need for support. Just as both the school district and the university had committed to work as writing partners, there was also a clear expectation that principals would collaborate with their school’s representative, providing necessary resources and time for sharing professional development and analyzing student work with grade-level colleagues.

**Project Goals**

The Writing Leadership Project was designed for 5th, 8th, and 12th grade Jefferson County Public Schools teachers who had been identified by principals as potential leaders or who had volunteered to serve as school leaders despite limited writing experience. The program’s goal was not merely to train teachers to prepare students for writing tests, but also to develop their skills as effective teachers and literacy leaders. University and district coordinators identified these objectives:
The Writing Leadership Project
Based on National Writing Project Principles

- Teachers are agents of reform; “universities and schools are ideal partners for investing in that reform through professional development.” (National Writing Project, 2010)
- Writing must be taught, “not just assigned, at all levels. Professional development programs should provide opportunities for teachers to work together to understand the full spectrum of writing development across grades and across subject areas.” (National Writing Project, 2010)
- “Knowledge about the teaching of writing comes from many sources: theory and research, the analysis of practice, and the experience of writing. Effective professional development programs provide frequent and ongoing opportunities for teachers to write and to examine theory, research, and practice together systematically.” (National Writing Project, 2010)
- “A reflective and informed community of practice is in the best position to design and develop comprehensive writing programs.” (National Writing Project, 2010)
- “Teachers who are well informed and effective in their practice can be successful teachers of other teachers as well as partners in educational research, development, and implementation. Collectively, teacher-leaders are our greatest resource for educational reform.” (National Writing Project, 2010).

Piloting the Writing Leadership Project
As district-university facilitators, we met regularly to plan professional development and coordinate efforts. The JCPS writing resource teacher focused on elementary schools, the LWP director was responsible for middle schools, and the JCPS writing specialist was responsible for high schools. Together we facilitated seven Saturday workshops during each school year. In year two, all teachers earning graduate credit from University of Louisville were also required to attend several sessions in addition to our WLP cohort workshops.

Two Saturday workshops were actually semi-annual Louisville Writing Project Conferences, where WLP participants discovered classroom-tested ideas for teaching writing. In addition, they observed Louisville Writing Project teachers model effective presentation skills. Other Saturday workshops focused on exploration of new units for teaching personal, informational, persuasive, literary, and reflective writing. Sessions began with a whole-group activity and moved into grade-level discussions. Elementary, middle, and high school groups followed similar routines.

First we modeled the teaching of sample unit lessons. “Having the units and the time at this project for preparation eased my worry on…how to transfer the writing info and skills students need to succeed (especially the on-demand),” a teacher later wrote. Participants had committed to trying lessons in their classrooms and sharing them with colleagues, so we wanted to make sure they felt prepared. “I know the content much better now and I feel confident in what and how I share information with my students,” one participant said. Previewing units

1) train cohorts of future writing leaders,
2) promote research-based practices in writing instruction,
3) establish a support network for school-based literacy leaders,
4) pilot new on-demand writing curriculum, and
5) develop candidates for future membership in Louisville Writing Project.
during partnership sessions was also designed to help teachers experience strategies as learners so that they would feel confident in demonstrating them as leaders.

Another key feature of all sessions was writing. Teachers began drafts of genres that students would be required to write, a practice advocated by the National Writing Project (NWP, 2010), and to which one teacher attributed increased student motivation. “I understood more clearly what each piece entailed; thus, I was more able to convey expectations and get better results.” Participants also brought samples of student writing generated from unit lessons and followed protocols to analyze this work. By learning how to evaluate writing with colleagues outside their schools, participants reported that they felt more comfortable leading analysis sessions within their own schools, “At the beginning of the year, I had no idea how to analyze students’ writing. Now I feel much more confidence and am able to help and guide others.”

Teachers returned to their own classrooms to pilot WLP units. At every workshop, teachers shared ways they had adapted lessons to meet students’ needs. “Comments from peers led to [my] reflecting on [my] teaching methods and [supported me in] writing new curriculum,” one teacher noted. “I implemented bits and pieces here and there that I heard others use [successfully].” This was possible because teachers discovered that no matter how different schools might be, challenges in teaching writing were very similar. One teacher captured participants’ common sentiments about a partnership and fellowship with other writing teachers:

I cannot overemphasize the value in collaboration. To my mind the best ideas I’ve incorporated in my lessons have come not from books, but from discussion with colleagues. Our students bring with them culture and baggage that our colleagues understand and can help us sort through and adapt lessons for.

Between sessions, facilitators visited participants’ classrooms to observe or model lessons and collaboratively analyze student work. We attended sessions led by WLP participants and occasionally led sessions ourselves. We sometimes met with principals to learn their perspectives on the Writing Leadership Project. As facilitators, however, we were sometimes frustrated in attempts to foster learning communities at teacher leaders’ schools. We had expected that all participants would engage in lesson studies and mimic analysis sessions within school grade groups. In year one, these things did not always happen. Our time as facilitators was often consumed by developing new writing units. With the press of other duties, we also could not visit schools in year one as much as we desired to meet, observe, review, and support our WLP project teachers. One facilitator reflected, “Out of eight elementary schools, I had frequent access to five. Of those five schools, four teacher leaders changed a great deal.”

To fill the gap between teachers’ needs for on-site support and competing needs for facilitators’ time, we increased our school visits in year two after JCPS added a team leader. During both years, 15 participants were visited by the writing resource teacher; 12 each by the JCPS writing specialist and Writing Project director; and 7 by the new team leader. The number of school visits for year one was 47. In year two, the total jumped to 128, reflecting facilitators’ commitment to increase school-based support.

A final frustration in year one was that some schools did not follow through on their commitment to analyze student work for a minimum of 10 hours. As a result, in year two district-university facilitators required participants to submit documentation concerning date, time, attendance, and content of school analysis sessions in order to receive their final stipend. Our contact hours for 2007–08 School Analysis Sessions (number of teachers x number of hours met) totaled nearly 918.

One part of the school district’s contribution to the partnership was to provide professional books. Several participants volunteered to try strategies described in these texts and then demonstrated strategies to our group. Others wrote reflections on texts and raised questions for discussion. Teachers noted that book studies were a
real benefit of sessions. They especially appreciated texts such as *Mechanically Inclined* (Anderson, 2005), which improved their knowledge of grammar instruction, and *Writing on Demand* (Gere, Christenbury, & Sassi, 2005), which improved understanding of best practices that also support students’ performance on writing tests. “[I] included ideas and resources into the writing of the [school improvement plan] and new school writing plan draft, such as using research-based strategies and [ideas from] the book *Mechanically Inclined*.”

Participants also worked with their school colleagues between project sessions. All were expected to lead a minimum of 10 hours of student work analysis. Some modeled lessons in colleagues’ classrooms. Others shared materials, including units. The final session both years was devoted to celebrating participants’ professional growth. Teachers chronicled positive changes in their ability to be effective writing coaches, assess student work, create positive writing activities, and act as school writing leaders. One teacher reflected:

I think that in the same way this partnership is about collaboration — so my colleagues and I came to realize the benefits of collaboration. Teachers now discuss more what is happening in their classrooms with instruction.

Project teachers reported that attitudes about teaching writing had improved not only in their classroom but also in their schools (Britt, 2007). These benefits were also main themes of participants’ presentations. As a result of our partnership, teachers cited evidence of increased involvement in both attending and leading professional development as well as increased collaboration with other teachers at their schools.

**Teachers’ Evaluation of Partnership Experiences**

Twenty-five teachers completed the 2006–07 program; eight elected to earn graduate credit. In 2007–08, 23 teachers joined; 12 chose to earn graduate credit. During our two-year pilot, the Writing Leadership Project served 35 schools in JCPS: 14 elementary, 10 middle, and 11 high schools. Partnership writing teachers impacted a total of 4,116 students (Britt, 2007). Teachers assessed project experiences at the end of each school year. Table 1 (Britt, 2007) shows an average of participants’ ratings of the Writing Leadership Project based on a 1–5 Likert scale (with 1 as “strongly disagree” and 5 “strongly agree”) developed by an independent evaluator employed by the university. Teacher evaluations remained high both years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effectiveness of Partnership Program</th>
<th>Year 1 Rating</th>
<th>Year 2 Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Partnership activities met my expectations.</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>4.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitators assisted my growth as a writing instructor.</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>4.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade-level facilitators were knowledgeable about writing instruction.</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>4.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing units distributed at sessions were useful in my classroom writing instruction.</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>4.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with other teachers in my group was helpful in identifying grade-level issues.</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>4.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examining students’ writing during sessions helped me become a better evaluator of my students’ writing.</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>4.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sessions at the Writing Project mini-conference assisted in the partnership’s work.</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>4.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I received support from the administration in my school to implement changes in writing instruction.</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, the partnership was effective in improving my effectiveness as a writing instructor.</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>4.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents marked “disagree strongly” on only one statement during both years — “I received administrative support to implement changes.” Facilitators noted this concern after year one; in year two, 30 percent of the respondents still reported inadequate administrative support. When invited to suggest improvements to the Writing Leadership Project, only three participants replied. One teacher suggested holding meetings after school rather
than on Saturdays. Two others requested more structured
time for facilitated discussion and collaboration:

The most beneficial thing I experienced was
discussion and evaluation of student work with
other grade-level teachers. In my opinion, we
needed more time for this important process,
particularly after new units had been implemented.

**Teachers’ Assessment of Their Growth**

Teachers were asked to provide specific examples of
effects, if any, that their project participation had upon
their teaching of writing. One teacher wrote, “It has
made writing fun to teach. The kids are engaged and
look forward to writing.” Another said, “I feel much
more confident about my abilities to teach writing
successfully to all students.” Teachers reported changes in
their teaching methods as well: “I now use more obvious
scaffolding strategies instead of going right for the throat
with a lesson.” One middle school teacher noted a similar
change, saying, “I am more focused on what my writers
need rather than just getting pieces done. I am more able
to facilitate conversations about writing with my team.”

Table 2 uses a Likert scale to show participants’
assessments of the partnership’s impact upon their
professional growth (Britt, 2007):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation in the Partnership:</th>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Year 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased my ability to analyze students’ writing</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>4.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased my ability to design writing curriculum</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>4.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provided writing units that I incorporated into my teaching</td>
<td>4.88</td>
<td>4.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased my ability to guide students through state writing requirements</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>4.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased my ability to help students prepare for state testing</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>4.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased my confidence as leader of writing in my school</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped me become a more effective teacher of writing</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>4.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped me become leader of writing in my school</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants consistently agreed that WLP increased
professional skills and confidence. Lowest levels of
agreement (though still very high) dealt with teachers’
ability to design writing curriculum. Teachers identified
many specific examples of growth: “My participation
has allowed me to be more self-reflective and evaluative
in regard to my teaching of writing. I have learned to
identify and work through student obstacles.” Some
worked with special education teachers “to show that
their students were capable of writing success”; others
worked with teachers in designing writing assignments
across the curriculum. Seven Writing Leadership Project
teachers reported mentoring teachers at their schools
during year one; all 20 respondents served as writing
mentors in year two. One respondent concluded, “This
project was a lifesaver for our school with three brand new
senior English teachers facing portfolios and on-demand
writing tests!”

**Teachers’ Assessment of School Change**

Participants were also asked to assess whether their
participation in the Writing Leadership Project had
influenced schools. Only one (of 39) respondent
perceived no apparent effect. Most common responses
included: 1) increased knowledge about writing among
teachers, 2) improved collegiality and cohesiveness in
the department/team, 3) improved abilities to analyze
student work and address students’ individual needs, 4)
increased collaboration and conversation among teachers
at school.

Without exception, every JCPS school that
participated in the district-university partnership increased
its on-demand writing scores. Table 3, for example, shows
dramatic contrasts in the percentage of grade five writers
who earned top scores (proficient and distinguished)
in on-demand writing tests before and after the WLP
(Kentucky Department of Education, 2009).
### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing Leadership Project Elementary Schools</th>
<th>% Proficient/Distinguished On-Demand Writers Before WLP</th>
<th>% Proficient/Distinguished On-Demand Writers After WLP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School A</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>23.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School B</td>
<td>4.00%</td>
<td>49.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C</td>
<td>3.37%</td>
<td>36.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School D</td>
<td>4.71%</td>
<td>33.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School E</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>40.79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School F</td>
<td>1.25%</td>
<td>47.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School G</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>38.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School H</td>
<td>4.69%</td>
<td>40.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School I</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>32.84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School J</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>45.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School K</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>46.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School L</td>
<td>2.56%</td>
<td>25.93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School M</td>
<td>1.41%</td>
<td>57.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School N</td>
<td>1.54%</td>
<td>28.26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, Writing Leadership Project middle schools consistently increased their on-demand writing scores. In 2005, before our collaborative partnership, the 10 WLP middle schools averaged only 9.86 percent Proficient and Distinguished Writers. By 2008, these same middle schools had more than doubled their average (25.24 percent) of Proficient and Distinguished On-Demand Writers. Every middle school celebrated positive changes in on-demand writing performance with Proficient and Distinguished writers increasing from .60 percent in one school to 27.92 percent for the most dramatically improved school (Kentucky Department of Education, 2009).

Table 4 shows significant gains in the on-demand writing index scores earned by grade 12 students at every Writing Leadership Project high school (Kentucky Department of Education, 2009):

### Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing Leadership Project High Schools</th>
<th>2007 High School On-Demand Writing Index Score</th>
<th>2009 High School On-Demand Writing Index Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School A</td>
<td>57.7</td>
<td>79.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School B</td>
<td>63.4</td>
<td>85.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C</td>
<td>57.4</td>
<td>71.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School D</td>
<td>48.4</td>
<td>78.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School E</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>83.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School F</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>108.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School G</td>
<td>55.8</td>
<td>79.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School H</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>72.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School I</td>
<td>49.8</td>
<td>66.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School J</td>
<td>51.0</td>
<td>77.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly, only four teachers directly referenced these dramatic increases in their schools’ writing scores when reflecting on the partnership’s impact upon their school. What appeared even more meaningful for the teachers, based upon frequency of their comments, was the positive experience of collaboration. One teacher concluded: “I found [WLP] to be a great deal of support and [it] kept my enthusiasm alive. It also provided me many valuable resources that I could pass along to my fellow teachers, which I believe helped to improve our writing scores.” Another participant offered this final recommendation to project facilitators: “This partnership is invaluable to any teacher who is serious about learning to become a better teacher of writing. Please do what you can to continue [the program] as there is nothing in this district that can compare to [WLP].”

### Results of the Partnership

Unfortunately, the formal writing partnership between Jefferson County Public Schools and Louisville Writing Project did not continue after our two-year pilot. While goals identified for the partnership had been met — promoting research-based practices in writing instruction, piloting on-demand writing curriculum,
The Writing Leadership Project continues to develop candidates for membership in Louisville Writing Project. After completion of LWP Summer Institutes, two WLP teachers have become active teacher consultants of the Louisville Writing Project. One of these teachers has already become part of the LWP leadership team. Another Writing Leadership Project teacher won the 2009 Milliken Foundation Award, a $25,000 reward given to the nation’s highest quality K−12 educators in recognition of their long-range potential for educational leadership.

School district facilitators identified the following as successful aspects of the partnership in terms of benefits for participants: 1) positive changes in teachers’ attitudes towards writing and writing instruction, 2) growth in teachers’ confidence as mentors and leaders, and 3) development of strategies to encourage student growth in writing. WLP university facilitator Jean Wolph summarized our project results:

This partnership provided an opportunity to share research and practice in writing instruction at a much deeper level than had been possible in less formal settings. Our collaboration served as a powerful form of professional development for ourselves as well as for the participants. We each had strengths in particular aspects of writing instruction and learned from one another because of shared planning and leadership. Her reflection mirrored the powerful collaborative learning effect that participants reported through their conversations around student work and lesson analysis. Collegiality fostered through our two-year project has led to continued sharing of writing strategies and materials.

Involvement of principals is crucial for success in professional development and community building. WLP facilitators realize now that we should have improved our communication with some school administrators who were not active members of our partnership. Given more information about program goals and activities, those principals might have become more involved and more supportive. With hindsight, we realize that we could have improved communication by (1) incorporating several administrator sessions throughout the course of the program and (2) allotting time during sessions for participants to write memos to their principals highlighting their successes and sharing their suggestions.

Evidence — teacher self-assessment, facilitator assessments, and improved student scores on writing assessments — indicates the WLP participants did change and improve their writing instruction. Elements of the program that may have contributed most to this positive change include adequate resources (professional books, stipends, and/or graduate tuition; released time at school to meet with colleagues; mentoring visits by facilitators to the school site) and adequate time (sessions scheduled throughout the entire school year; ample opportunities between sessions for participants to complete professional readings, try lessons, meet with colleagues, and analyze student work). Other key factors seem to be program design (voluntary participation as well as extended time for teacher conversation, reflection, and collaboration) and response to teacher, classroom, and school contexts (sharing of lessons and analysis of student work).

High-stakes assessment demands attention from districts who want results and teachers who realize they do not know enough to help students succeed. Our JCPS and University of Louisville Writing Leadership Project broadened the focus from preparing for state tests to
emphasizing best practices that support strong writing instruction. All members of this district-university collaboration benefited from our partnership. Participants evaluated the WLP as a collaborative professional development model that helped them become more knowledgeable and more skilled as writing teachers and leaders. Teachers who would have been isolated to bear the burden of high-stakes testing alone grew stronger through networking with other classroom teachers facing this same challenge. District facilitators, overwhelmed by in-service demands, were encouraged by the positive impact of long-term professional development upon teacher and student work. University teacher educators, sometimes criticized for isolation from the daily world of K–12 teaching, found a valuable way to stay grounded in the classroom. One teacher’s reflection captures the essence of our partnership’s effects; she noted that she had come to the WLP knowing very little about writing instruction. At the end of the project, she wrote, “Teachers come to me now and I can help!”

References


