NWP Funds Local Research Studies

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In August, the National Writing Project launched the Local Site Research Initiative with the announcement of awards to six sites. Grants of $20,000 will enable the selected sites to pursue research plans that will provide results that are of local interest while at the same time informing questions about the impact of writing project activities in the larger sense. Conceived as the first of several annual waves of local site studies (pending continued funding), these pioneers are exploring an innovative approach to the evaluation of complex programs like the NWP, one that prizes local uniquenesses and seeks to address them in locally appropriate ways.

The first wave of funded sites includes the Mississippi Writing and Thinking Project, the National Writing Project at Kent State University (Ohio), the Pennsylvania Writing and Literature Project, the South Coast Writing Project (California), the Southern Nevada Writing Project, and the Western Massachusetts Writing Project.

The purpose of the NWP Local Site Research Initiative is to stimulate and support research efforts that will be locally defined and locally responsive while adding to national knowledge about the writing project practices. Specifically, this initiative speaks to two of the central goals of NWP's research agenda: the efficacy of its professional development model and its impact on professional practice and student outcomes.

(For further information on NWP's research agenda, see the Voice, Volume 8, Number 4.) As NWP grows as a network, it is increasingly called upon to demonstrate results. The national study conducted by the Academy for Educational Development from 1999 to 2002 shows that students benefit when their teachers participate in programs sponsored by a local writing project site. The six currently funded studies will add to this evidentiary base about the impact of the writing project model.

Interest in the Local Site Research Initiative has been high. The six sites selected for initial funding were chosen both for the quality of their research plans and their ability to form a collective portfolio that is complementary with respect to both questions asked and methods used to explore them. At the core, each site is investigating how a key component of the writing project model contributes to changes in teaching practice and to student learning and achievement in writing. Two sites are examining the effects of the invitational summer institute; three sites are investigating how intensive and sustained inservice work affects teacher and student learning; and one is researching the effects of a continuity program on the site, teacher-consultants, and students. The studies employ a range of data to examine student learning, including performance on state and local assessments, responses to writing prompts and revision tasks, and analysis of student portfolios. Finally, each research project includes a strong comparative perspective.

Each site's unique perspective on the question of NWP impact is highlighted here.

• Mississippi Writing and Thinking Project: The Mississippi Writing and Thinking Project will conduct a three-pronged approach to research, including two comparative studies and one longitudinal study. The two comparative studies will include a study of fourth grade writing in 13 elementary schools in Rankin County and a study of seventh grade writing in 5 middle schools located throughout the state. In addition, the site plans a five-year longitudinal study of a group of current seventh-graders in Columbus, Mississippi.

• National Writing Project at Kent State University: This research project will compare the growth and performance on writing assessments of students in the classrooms of teachers who participated in the summer institute over the past three years with students in classrooms of teachers who have participated in other high quality literacy professional development. In particular the study intends to examine four types of outcomes: students' performance on state proficiency tests in writing in comparison with school and district averages; growth in students' essay writing skills over the course of a year in comparison with a control group; students' ability to use a wide range of revision skills; and teachers' utilization of effective strategies.

• Pennsylvania Writing and Literature Project (PAWLP): This research project focuses on the impact of the site's year-long, school-based professional development program on student writing and the teaching and learning of writing processes and strategies. Researchers will compare student outcomes on fall and spring direct assessments modeled after the state's writing test in two K-5 rural schools identified by the state department of education as demographically similar. In order to examine impact on writing process, they will draw on teacher interviews, classroom observations, and an established measure used by the state to examine writing process and strategies. One school's faculty will participate in intensive professional development throughout the year, while the comparison school will participate in PAWLP's pre- and post-assessment process and use these results to inform their teaching without intensive professional development.

• South Coast Writing Project (SCWirP): SCWirP's study will investigate the impact of its IMPPC (inquiry, inservice workshops, models, practice, and coaching) program, an intensive professional development program the site has conducted with ten partnership schools over the past three years. The project will employ both process evaluation and comparative design elements in order to pursue two lines of investigation. First, researchers will seek "to describe the process that encourages teachers to implement new strategies." Second, they plan "to measure the differential impact of the intensive inservice program upon the practices of participating teachers and the writing skills, attitudes, and achievement of students."

• Southern Nevada Writing Project: The Southern Nevada Writing Project's research will examine the impact of a continuity project focusing on a family writing program (FWP). The following research questions will guide their study: 1) What constitutes powerful continuity? 2) How do teacher-consultants describe aspects of the FWP as powerful continuity? What aspects of the FWP are consistent with a definition of powerful continuity? 3) Does participation in the FWP impact student learning? If so, how and/or in what ways? The study will incorporate mixed methods, taking advantage of both quantitative and qualitative data to inform the results. A quasi-experimental design at the school level will be used to examine differences between schools with a family writing program and those without. The qualitative analysis will be used to eliminate potential threats to internal validity. Qualitative methods, including survey, interview, and observation, will be used to triangulate the data and to gain insight into see Local Research Studies, next page
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social, cultural, and instructional nuances of the various research sites.

- Western Massachusetts Writing Project:
The Western Massachusetts Writing Project's study will analyze what happens to the teaching of writing and student writing in a whole school when a substantial proportion of a school's faculty has participated in the summer institute. In particular, this study is interested in whether writing project teachers in such a setting influence the practice of their colleagues and the overall writing performance of students. This retrospective study will use student portfolios regularly collected in the school along with five years of state assessment results to examine student outcomes, and it will rely on teacher interviews and additional analysis of portfolios to examine impact on teachers. For comparison, the study will include teachers from a matched comparison school and writing project and non-writing project teachers from the school with intensive involvement.

In addition to receiving the funding to support their research plans, the selected sites will join a number of other sites engaged in research in the NWP Research Forum. Through this forum, NWP hopes to encourage continued pursuit of sites' research plans, both for mutual benefit and to position their work well for possible future funding. Forum participants will also have the opportunity to learn from each others' work, gain technical and intellectual support for their research endeavors, and stimulate conversation among writing project sites engaged in research.

In addition to the Local Site Research Initiative, the NWP national office also supports participation in the NWP Research Forum.

These projects are just the beginning. It is anticipated that with continued funding from the federal government, NWP will fund new cohorts in each of several years to come. Look for announcements of this opportunity for sites in upcoming publications and look also for an NWP Annual Meeting session at which currently funded sites will share their research work with others and all can learn about access to funding in the year ahead.

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