

Chapter excerpted from: *Expanding the Reach of Education Reforms: Perspectives from Leaders in the Scale-Up of Educational Interventions*, Thomas K. Glennan et al., editors, MG-248-FF, Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 2004. 81-106.

CHAPTER THREE

The National Writing Project: Scaling Up and Scaling Down

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McDonald, Buchanan, and Sterling introduce the interesting notion of “scaling up by scaling down,” by which they mean that, to succeed in a new environment, a reform that is spreading geographically must also challenge and, eventually, penetrate habitual practice in new contexts. To achieve this penetration, the National Writing Project (NWP) focuses on professional development and professional networks for writing teachers. NWP promoted both spread and depth of change through its “improvement infrastructure,” a system made up of three elements: an annual review process, the development of specialized cross-site networks, and a commitment to both internal, site-based, practitioner-directed research and external, national, and independent research as a means of learning from experience.

Scaling up educational reform necessarily involves taking risks. This is, first of all, because new investments are required. To scale up their reforms, reformers must raise new resources and decide on an investment strategy. They must then hope that the investment strategy, and the quantity and quality of the resources raised and invested, will be sufficient to create a proportional effect—that a reform effective in three settings, for example, will be effective in nine, ninety, or nine hundred. Many reformers accept this challenge because, by definition, they are risk-defiant. They have already challenged the status quo. They accept it also because they want to protect their original investment. They know that reforms that do not scale up—reforms that stay bound to only one or a few contexts—are, in the end, anomalies rather than reforms.

Risk-taking also plays another role in the scaling up of educational reform, a role often overlooked. Reform at any scale puts practitioners’ ordinary beliefs and habits at risk. This is its fundamental dynamic. It aims to displace conventional beliefs and habits with new ones, but old beliefs and habits may be deeply ingrained, tacitly held, comfortable, even useful for reasons the reformers might not appreciate. They are, therefore, very difficult to displace. Working to displace ordinary practice, persuading many teachers in many places that they must risk change, and building the capacity for improved practice is what scaling *down* is all about.

In a discussion of theory-based reform and problems of change, Stokes et al. (1997) argue that the word *scale* in the context of educational reform must be understood in two different but complementary senses. First is the *spread* across numbers of different contexts: states, districts, schools, classrooms. This is the sense of the word captured in the phrase “scaling up reform.” Second is the *penetration* of actual practice in these contexts. Following Elmore (1996) and McDonald (1996), we use the phrase *scaling down* to indicate the process whereby a spreading reform challenges habitual practice in the new contexts and habitual practice yields to new ways of working.

At the heart of educational reform, we believe, is the challenge of encouraging practitioners, at all levels, to face the risk of undergoing real change. It is a challenge that does not go away when the reform is scaled up. Fullan (1999) puts it well in saying that large-scale reform involves “the development of local capacity thousands of times over” (p. 66). For this reason, scaling up

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reform involves preparation for risk-taking thousands of times over. Individual teachers, administrators, and community members must be willing to confront their own values and beliefs. Many must be persuaded to invest cognitively and emotionally in new values and beliefs. To persuade these individuals, reformers must be prepared to provide opportunities and support. They may also need to displace some of their own beliefs and habits. For example, they may be forced to recognize that reform is ultimately personal, rather than merely technical, and that its usual targets—namely teachers—must also be regarded as its ultimate agents. To explain this paradox, Stokes (2002) offers an apt analogy:

A minister can't make a person have faith, and a therapist can't make a person develop self-knowledge; rather the person makes the leap of faith required for both, and that can actualize the change with the help of the right supports.

Without the right supports, people are unlikely to take risks; we may find enthusiasm for reform but are not likely to find much real change. Existing beliefs and habits of practice may be merely amended—glossed over—rather than being displaced. Consider, for example, Cohen's (1990) now classic encounter with Mrs. Oublier, the California teacher who claimed that statewide mathematics reforms had transformed her teaching. As Cohen watched her teach, however, he discerned only a patina of change—one more likely to confuse her students than to equip them with deeper mathematical understanding.

In its noun form, the French verb *oublier* (to forget) can mean an overlooked person or thing. It is not surprising that, in trying to scale up reform across an entire state, what may be overlooked is the depth of support and intensity of effort required to change the tacit beliefs and everyday habits of individual teachers, such as Mrs. Oublier. More generally, what may be overlooked in the rush to instill new beliefs and habits is the problem of unlearning the old ones. Unlearning is required, as Gardner (1991) points out, because an established conception is likely to trump a new conception unless deliberately challenged. Such deliberate challenge must be at the heart of reform, or the reform will fail.

In this chapter, we explore this perspective on the scaling up of reform by considering the work and organizational history of the National Writing Project (NWP). NWP developed over the course of 25 years, from one site in 1973–1974, the Bay Area Writing Project (BAWP) at the University of California, Berkeley, to a steadily growing network of 175 local sites in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. In this chapter, we consider scale in both its meanings: the development and spread of the network and its capacity to penetrate and challenge tacit beliefs and everyday habits in the teaching of writing.

The NWP Design

Scaling up occurs continually in all layers of the NWP organization. New sites are added each year through an application process that establishes local leadership and programming that follows the NWP model. Existing sites—each a local school-university partnership—continue to grow as new groups of experienced K–12 teachers join four- or five-week invitational institutes every summer at every site and as new opportunities for professional development are designed

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and launched in partnership with local schools and districts. NWP also designs and conducts national programs to engage sites in exploring salient issues and to amplify and extend their work across the network. The goal of these efforts is to ensure that, eventually, a local writing project site will be within reach of every teacher in the nation.

Meanwhile, scaling down also occurs across all layers of NWP. New teachers must come to terms with the rigorous practices at the heart of NWP involvement, and veteran NWP teachers must continue to integrate these practices into their professional lives: writing, sharing writing, opening up one's practice of teaching writing to peer review, and learning to become a teacher of teachers. Nationally, NWP works to strengthen and deepen the efforts of local sites by requiring them to raise at least half their own funding, open their own practices and theories of action to peer review, identify local needs and interests and build strategies to address them, and examine the influence of their work on teachers and students, modifying these efforts as needed to achieve success.

Indeed, scaling up *and* scaling down are at the heart of NWP's theory of action, as Lieberman and Wood (2003, pp. 100–101) suggest in their recent study of two writing project sites:

On the face of it, the NWP strategy appears to be directed toward changing teachers one at a time, a strategy that would have limited impact on the teaching of writing and on the profession as a whole. This characterization masks a far more complex strategy, involving strategies of change and professional development both for individuals and for communities within a network context.

Teachers come to the invitational as individuals, but most go home as members of a community. They fulfill their responsibilities as community members by becoming [teacher consultants] and facilitating professional development for others in their profession, creating new ties and relationships. Rather than a strategy for changing teachers one by one, the NWP has launched a far more complex undertaking involving both individual and collective learning.

Mission and Principles

NWP's mission is to improve the teaching of writing and thus improve learning in the nation's schools. Underpinning the mission are big ideas—core principles that serve as the foundation of the NWP model. Among them are the following:

- Writing can and should be taught, not just assigned, at every level of schooling.
- Teachers of writing must write.
- Effective professional development programs provide frequent opportunities for teachers to examine research and practice together systematically.
- Teachers at every level—from kindergarten to college—are the agents of reform; universities and schools are ideal partners for investing together in that reform.
- Although there is no single right approach to teaching writing, some practices are more effective than others, and a research-informed community of practice is in the best position to design and develop a comprehensive writing program.

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Getting to scale with these principles is the work of local writing project sites across the country, assisted by a national network deliberately designed with these principles in mind.

Writing Project Sites

NWP exists within and across multiple layers of authority and activity. At one layer are writing project sites housed on university campuses. These sites are designed to be robust professional and social communities that occupy an intermediary or “third space,” neither wholly of the university nor wholly of the school districts (Eidman-Aadah, 1996; Lieberman and Grolnick, 1996).

In addition to providing the core principles that govern site-level work, NWP also prescribes elements of each site’s design—even as it leaves other elements to local invention. The prescribed elements include a four- or five-week invitational institute for approximately 25 teachers each summer. This institute has certain required features: participation across all grade levels; readings that involve research, theory, and practice in the teaching of writing; scheduled time for each teacher to present from his or her own practice of teaching writing; and time for each teacher to write several extended pieces during the five-week period. Another prescribed element of local site design is the establishment of a professional community of writers and teachers of writers, in which teachers network and learn from each other through a series of programs.

A third prescribed element is the provision of continuing professional-education programs for other teachers in the local area. These programs are collaboratively designed with schools and districts and are conducted wholly or in part by veteran NWP teachers, known as teacher-consultants. In 2001–02, local writing project sites, with an average of 70 experienced teacher-consultants each, conducted more than 3,000 in-service workshops for teachers, schools, and districts. Many of these workshops reflect the efforts of collaborating schools and districts to integrate the teaching of writing with comprehensive reforms of curriculum and classroom practice and to enhance the achievement of all students, with special emphasis on those most in need.

From One Site to Many Sites

In 1976, California state funding became available to support scaling up the first writing project site, BAWP, to a network of 13 additional sites. A key leadership decision at this time was to expand as a network of autonomous sites and to use what was learned by developing BAWP to support the establishment of these new sites. This early decision can be understood as the first attempt to scale up by scaling down to the creation of autonomous local sites able to adapt to local strengths and challenges and to build local capacity.

From 1977 through 1987, NWP leaders described the project as an expanding network. Both private foundation funding and support from the National Endowment for the Humanities provided “seed money” to support new sites across the country. During this decade, procedures for establishing and mentoring new sites were developed. These included requiring matching funds from local sites and providing support to new sites through visits by experienced NWP

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directors. By 1987, NWP had expanded to 166 local sites, functioning autonomously in a loosely connected national network.

After this rapid expansion, significant change occurred at every level of the NWP organization—demonstrating that getting to scale is hardly a linear process. The size and diversity of the network produced a range of new problems, issues, and knowledge that the network responded to through a variety of new strategies and structures. In 1991, NWP received federal funding to support its mission. This funding, in turn, provided the opportunity to address new issues of scale. The federal funding carried the same matching requirement as earlier funding for site development had but also occasioned the development of a rigorous annual peer-review process, described below. This annual review has come to be for site development what the summer institute is for teacher development: a crucial mechanism for scaling down.

In the review process, a group of 50 writing project directors and lead teacher-consultants read and review the proposals submitted for renewed funding. Reviewers attend in detail to the basic model of the summer invitational institute, school year in-service programs, continuity programs for teachers in the local service area, and development of teacher leadership at the site. All these components are deemed essential to ensuring the health of a writing project site. This annual process has strengthened the capacity of knowledgeable site directors and teacher-consultants to provide strategies and approaches for other sites in circumstances similar to their own and enforced a strong sense of lateral accountability in the network. The insights and support of this group of peers are important resources, helping the network as a whole solve the real dilemmas of implementing work at individual sites.

Site leaders facing challenges in implementing the model are supported through a program of technical assistance coordinated by the NWP national office and planned jointly by national and local leaders. If the site cannot make necessary changes after significant technical assistance has been provided, it loses its funding. On average, NWP closes three sites a year.

Indeed, the work of the past decade across the network—now 175 sites and growing—has been as much centered on scaling down as on scaling up. That is, it has focused on challenging and supporting new and existing sites so that they can respond locally to increasing demands for their expertise and can use that expertise to challenge and support teachers. The requirement for matching funds helps ensure that sites grow in proportion to their capacity to work in local schools and districts because schools and districts are often the source of these matching funds. The match requirement also builds a sense of local ownership and control even as it ensures the success of the local project in addressing local needs and interests. These requirements help ensure that those who encourage teachers to take risks are not too distant from the work, that they know well how much they are asking, and that they do so in a way that is locally sensitive and therefore potentially more effective.

An Improvement Infrastructure

NWP has been designed over time as if it had been following the 25/75 rule Fullan proposed for managing large-scale change efforts: “Twenty-five percent of the solution is having good directional ideas; seventy-five percent is figuring out how to get there in one local context after

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another” (Fullan, 2001, p. 268). In the case of NWP, local contexts cover an extraordinary range: Juneau, Alaska; The Bronx, New York; Starkville, Mississippi; and Stillwater, Oklahoma, are only a few of the hundreds of communities served by writing project sites. Much more than cultural diversity can be found in this sample mix, though accounting for the cultural diversity alone is critical. Diversity of policy environments, of system structures, of traditions in teacher preparation and continuing professional development, of curricular constraints, and of experience in school-university partnerships are all present.

Such variation makes achieving the 25/75 mix of good ideas and adaptation to local contexts that Fullan (2001) described a challenge. Can an overarching direction survive intact given this degree of geographic, political, and cultural diversity and, at the same time, avoid seeming distant and bureaucratic? How much adaptation is possible before the adaptation threatens the reform’s theory of action and before the mission and its effects become impossible to discern?

In managing this dilemma, the NWP hallmark has been to attend to the knowledge of practice that practice itself generates—not just the practice of teachers but also of sites and of cross-site projects. All the components of the NWP network aim to build and support local, sustainable, professional communities focused on improvement in the teaching of writing. The strategy is to combine local and cross-network perspectives, to integrate direction-setting with continual adaptation, and thus to focus all the benefits of scale—resources, varied expertise and perspective, stability, and reputation—on improving teaching and learning locally. St. John (2002) calls the NWP network an “improvement infrastructure.”

The following subsections describe the three key components of this improvement infrastructure, each of which involves implicit risk-taking.

Funding Match and Annual Reviews. As mentioned above, local writing project sites apply to NWP for federal funds to support the basic elements of the model—the invitational summer institute and local teacher networking. Sites must match these funds at a one-to-one rate by developing contracts with schools and districts to provide in-service professional development. One result of the matching requirement is that sites must interpret the core principles and tailor the model to serve local interests. This requires designs and efforts that are locally responsive and therefore locally valued.

All sites are held accountable for the use of funds they receive by means of a rigorous annual review that other site directors as well as national staff conduct. The review combines examination of site activities using NWP’s principles as its basis, mentoring of directors by highly regarded peers, and strategic financial planning. The review does not focus only on problem-finding, although the process may reveal serious problems. It also focuses on collaboratively solving whatever problems are found—big or small—and on tapping the resources of the network as a whole to do so.

Specialized Cross-Site Networks. Another component of the overall NWP design is specialized cross-site networks that focus on particular dimensions of practice and thereby generate new directions as needed. For example, an Urban Sites Network and a Rural Sites Network are up and

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running, in addition to networks focused on the work of teaching writing to English language learners and of supporting teacher inquiry communities. These networks were created in response to needs expressed by site directors and teacher-consultants who gather regularly in regional and national meetings of NWP.

The Rural Sites Network, for example, was first conceived during a breakout session of a 1992 meeting of site directors. Ann Dobie, a rural site director, recalls the meeting in her contribution to NWP founder James Gray's memoir (2000, p. 121):

[We] talked of serving large areas that make it hard to attract teachers to summer institutes, maintain continuity programs, and provide in-service workshops. [We] agreed that cultural differences sometimes make rural school authorities suspicious of university personnel and reluctant to change, and [we] recognized that [we] serve multicultural populations, including the poor, who live in situations different from those found in inner cities. We realized, with surprise bordering on shock, that we were talking about problems and strengths we had thought were ours alone.

The risk-taking implicit in encouraging the development of networks within networks is that they might prove divisive, that focus of direction might be compromised, and that traditions might be challenged. The benefit, however, is in protecting and supporting diversity and in learning from it, even as the scale of the overall organization grows.

Research. Another component of the overall NWP network design involves research—both internal, site-based, practitioner-directed research and external, national, and independent research. The risk in undertaking research of either kind is that it may show weaknesses, be they in theories of action, in fidelity of implementation, or in impact and effectiveness. The benefit is, of course, that such data either will point to new directions for change and improvement or will substantiate the effort, leading to continued support.

Tracking local effects, and using them as a check on wishful thinking, has been a tradition of the writing project since BAWP's first summer institute. In the early 1990s, internal research suggested there were underserved districts and schools within reach of writing project sites in many locations across the country. The Urban Sites Network was the first cross-site network to focus on this issue. This recognition broadened to include rural sites as well, and the desire to develop new approaches to address this service gap prompted the design of Project Outreach, now in its eighth year. Sites participating in Project Outreach work with local teacher-leaders in previously underserved districts and schools to develop strategies to meet the needs of teachers in these schools for professional development in the teaching of writing.

External and national studies also provide the network with important data and opportunities for reflection. For instance, a three-year study by the Academy for Educational Development (AED) (Fancsali and Silverstein, 2002) traced NWP's influence on student achievement in writing in 36 classrooms across five states. Its data sources included teacher-generated assignments and corresponding student writing samples, as well as student writing produced in response to timed writing prompts. First, the findings of this study indicate a high degree of alignment between the practices NWP advocates and the effects on teacher behavior and student performance. Compared to the classes of other teachers (i.e., not involved in the writing project) practicing in

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similar contexts and conditions, NWP teachers spent more instructional time on writing than did a comparable national sample of teachers and were more likely to use research-based practices that they had learned in their NWP experiences. Moreover, most of their students reached high levels of rhetorical effectiveness, organizational coherence, and control of conventions on timed assessments of persuasive writing, as well as on classroom assignments.

Specifically, the study included baseline and follow-up writing prompts administered to measure students' writing achievement and progress from fall to spring in the 1999–00, 2000–01, and 2001–02 school years. To allow for analysis of change over time and to control for measurement effects, such as the difficulty of the prompts, the researchers used a counterbalanced design in which students were asked to respond to one prompt in the fall (baseline) and one prompt in the spring (follow-up). Each version of the prompt was administered in both the fall and spring, with approximately half of the students responding to each prompt at each administration. Thus, all students wrote to both prompts. The writing prompts used in the study assessed similar writing skills because they asked students to write a persuasive letter to someone they knew. Their writing was scored on two separate aspects of writing: rhetorical effectiveness and writing conventions. The pattern of student improvement in writing remained consistent across all three years of the study.

In response to these timed writing prompts during the 2001–02 school year, for example, 82 percent of third-graders and 85 percent of fourth-graders reached adequate or strong achievement of effectiveness in persuasive writing by their second assessment. This represents an increase of 16 percent and 6 percent of the third- and fourth-graders, respectively. Overall, 60 percent of third-graders and 49 percent of fourth-graders demonstrated an improvement in rhetorical effectiveness from baseline to follow-up. The percentage of students reaching strong achievement more than doubled from baseline to follow-up, and the percentage scoring only limited achievement dropped by nearly one-third. By their second assessment, most third-graders (72 percent) and fourth-graders (78 percent) also demonstrated general or clear control of the writing conventions of usage, mechanics, and spelling, an increase of 17 percent and 6 percent of the third- and fourth-graders, respectively. Overall, 51 percent of third-graders and 45 percent of fourth-graders demonstrated an improvement in use of conventions from baseline to follow-up.

AED staff also surveyed and interviewed all NWP teachers in years one and two of the study about their participation in writing project staff development and its influence on them professionally. Teachers reported that the writing project caused them to change their teaching practices. NWP teachers were likely to spend much more time on writing instruction than most fourth-grade teachers across the country, and 75 percent of the teachers in the study reported that the writing project provided them with new information, including useful ideas based on research.

Teachers at each writing project site evaluate their local invitational institute experience every summer, providing another national measure of effectiveness. Follow-up studies aimed at assessing the influence of professional development on classroom practices include a large-scale survey of NWP teachers one year after completing the summer institute. Recent findings, based on reports of improved practice and perceived benefit for students, suggest that the impact is

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substantial. For example, at all grade levels, almost 90 percent of the teachers reported that their students better understand the qualities of good writing and the value of writing for both discovery and communication. Moreover, 80 percent of the participants reported that their students can better explain in writing what they are thinking and learning in the different subjects they (the teachers) teach, and 79 percent of the teachers said that their students have a better grasp of writing conventions and editing skills (St. John, 2002).

Lieberman and Wood (2003) looked in depth at two local writing project sites, one serving a major metropolitan area and one serving a broad geographic area encompassing rural, suburban, and urban districts. The researchers traced the influence of the invitational summer institute on a sample of teachers through observations of their practice. They concluded that the teachers had expanded their teaching repertoires as a result of their network experience and had become more adept at matching teaching strategies with individual student needs in these varied communities.

A Culture of Risk-Taking

To appreciate the *scale* of NWP's scaling up, it helps to have a picture of the state of teacher education in the early 1970s with respect to the teaching of writing. Keith Caldwell, a member of the first BAWP summer institute, recalls the terrain he faced as a teacher-consultant:

I was moved to ask the first fifty groups I worked with in California and around the country one question: Which university or other institution of higher learning taught you how to teach writing? In no case, did any teacher—from Maine to Arizona or New York to Los Angeles—raise a hand. None, zero, zilch. Not one person could tell me where they had been taught to teach kids to write, to do the job they were hired to do and were doing. No department of education, anywhere, had taught them. We had an entire nation being taught by untrained teachers who had nowhere to go to get trained to teach writing. (quoted in Gray, 2000, p. 23.)

Others in the education community had also noticed and responded to the problem. Researchers Emig (1971) and Britton (1975) and teachers Moffett (1968) and Macrorie (1970) were devising a theoretical and practical framework for the teaching of writing. It would direct attention to the *process* of writing, as well as to its products, reconceptualizing writing as a mode of learning rather than merely a modality for reporting learning.

Indeed, this confluence of new research, professional experimentation, and a shift in public attitude in the 1970s created the same kinds of opportunity with respect to writing instruction that a similar confluence in the early 1990s created for school reform. The problem then was how to overcome contrary beliefs and habits among practitioners, how to encourage them to risk disruption to their practice by seeing the opportunity beyond the risk, and how to enlist the best among them in the creation and dissemination of new practices.

In his memoir of the early years of NWP's development, Gray (2000) recalls how casually the project's initiation rite—participation in the invitational summer institute—came to be founded on risk-taking. A former high school teacher turned Berkeley teacher educator, Gray began meeting regularly with Bill Brandt, a professor of rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley, and Albert “Cap” Lavin, a high school English teacher, to plan BAWP. “What would

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this Bay Area Writing Project be and do?” they asked themselves. Hitting first on the idea of a summer institute, they casually brainstormed what teachers would do in it. “We ought to have them write,” Gray recalls one of his colleagues saying. This “offhand remark,” as he terms it, became a defining feature of the five-week summer institute (Gray, 2000, p. 48).

Asking teachers of writing to dare to be writers themselves may seem an obvious design feature for a writing project. But it was then, as it is now, quite novel for discipline-based teacher education programs to design for actual practice of the discipline. Indeed, Gray’s recollection suggests that it was not at first obvious to him and his early writing project colleagues that writing was a *necessary* feature of what they were planning—that one could not think deeply about the teaching of writing without engaging in writing.

The reason for this lag in perception may be that writing appears to be a simpler process than it actually is. Writing is most often encountered in its finished form—when we are reading it as edited and published. Even professional writers who stray from the work for a couple of days or a week may forget how tortuous and challenging a task it is to make words read smoothly, to combine them to build sense and argument. However, professional writers are accustomed to the paradox and soon settle back into the struggle. Those who may be accustomed to engaging only in casual workplace or personal writing may think whenever they take on the risk of more substantial writing that it is only they who struggle and that writing remains for others as simple as it looks in its finished form.

Since that first summer in the Bay Area in 1974, teachers have been writing at local writing project sites and sharing their writing with their kindergarten through university peers in their own institutes. Five years ago, NWP began a new online phase of this work with the launch of a summer “e-anthology,” a forum in which teachers in summer institutes across the country post their writing and receive responses from colleagues. In summer 2002, 1,089 teachers at 70 local writing project sites participated in this electronic exchange.

Writing as an activity, rather than as a topic or product, also plays a role in all NWP meetings and workshops. This activity is essential because the challenges of writing are easy to underestimate and misapprehend absent fresh experience of them. One cannot teach writing in sensible ways, or teach others to do so, without understanding these challenges. Thus, asking NWP network members to risk putting pen to paper or fingers to keyboard again and again—as a ritual of membership—is also a strategy to ensure that the scale-up is genuine, and not, as in the case of Mrs. Oublier, something spurious.

Neither is the act of writing the sole risk writing project teachers must face in their summer institutes and throughout their participation in the network. The summer institute and other network gatherings ask them to share drafts of their writing in peer response groups where critical feedback is defined as helpful. They are also asked to share examples of their teaching practices with each other, again with the expectation of both critique and support, and on the basis of an overall understanding that the network is fundamentally an organization of teachers teaching teachers. The teachers also draw on outsiders’ perspectives on the teaching of writing;

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this practice involves yet another risk—opening one’s practice to the insights of outside experts by reading and discussing texts.

In facing the first two risks, writing and sharing, teachers experience the relief and exhilaration that come from discovering that they too are writers and that writing is difficult for everyone—though no harder for themselves. In the process, they become open to the equally risky step of sharing their teaching of writing and of opening themselves up to both collegial critique and collegial learning. Finally, in a context made safe by mutual support, mutual risk-taking, and an experience of mutual benefit, they face the fourth risk, which is to open their minds to views about teaching writing proposed by outside experts.

Lieberman and Wood (2003) suggest that what makes all four risks so risky, and so beneficial in terms of teacher growth, is that they turn what are in ordinary professional practice private acts—writing, teaching, learning—into public performances. These performances, in turn, create the mechanism for challenging and extending the learning of other practitioners. Thus, they challenge ordinary practice even as they provide a context for new practice.

Organizational Risk-Taking

As suggested above in identifying the implicit risks attached to components of the NWP network design, risk-taking in NWP goes well beyond the four risks introduced to teachers at their first summer institute. It plays a role in the theories, strategic designs, and practices of the organization at all levels.

Looking at two additional central features of NWP will help to explore this idea further: First, it is a network, and, second, the network is composed of school-university partnerships. Both features carry great risk organizationally, as many reform-minded organizations have discovered. Why, then, has NWP constructed itself in this way?

With regard to networking, the answer is quite simple. The reason BAWP attracted funding and other support to scale up in the first place was because of networking—elemental, word-of-mouth networking. Gray (2000, pp. 112–113) quotes from a report Paul B. Diederich of the Educational Testing Service wrote following a visit to BAWP in one of its early years:

I could not estimate how many meetings, workshops, and cooperative projects of English teachers I have participated in over the past forty years, but I know that the usual attitude is one of polite skepticism interspersed with strong opposition. I seldom get the idea that these teachers are going to do something about the ideas expressed in these meetings. But here in the Bay Area you have a large group of intelligent and well-informed teachers whose attitude toward BAWP methods of training and rejuvenating teachers are wildly enthusiastic. They are not only applying the ideas they have picked up in their own teaching but are also eager to spread the word. . . . I have been getting bits and pieces of information about the Bay Area project ever since it started, even though no article has been published about it that gave the whole picture of what it is about. The basic ideas about the project that reached me by word of mouth seemed so practical and attractive that I have long wanted to get a close look.

Diederich sensed that a possible movement was under way, and Gray and his colleagues sensed that what a movement needs to keep moving and growing is a network. An organizationally tighter entity might threaten the momentum; something looser might dissipate the energy. In the

introduction to *The Tipping Point* (2000, p. 5), Gladwell asks, “How does a thirty-dollar pair of shoes go from a handful of downtown Manhattan hipsters and designers to every mall in America in the space of two years?” Of course, the reform of writing instruction is different from the resurgence of Hush Puppies—for all kinds of reasons, including the complexity of the task and the importance of the outcome. Still, one should not underestimate the potential for educational reform of unofficial connectors and implementers and the contagion of ideas that work.

Of course, Gray and his colleagues might have taken a different and less-risky direction. Instead of becoming a network in its own right, NWP might have become merely a BAWP outreach program, providing help to other organizations in other places seeking to start their own writing programs, each in its own image. Early on, BAWP did do some consulting of this kind (Gray, 2000). Alternatively, at the other end of an organizational continuum, NWP might have become a strict franchise operation, making no allowances for local contexts and conditions.

Either of these designs would have been less risky because each would have dealt more definitively than a network can with the dilemma of fidelity and adaptation. The first would have dealt with the dilemma by denying the desirability of fidelity: “Let a thousand flowers bloom.” The second would have dealt with it by denying the desirability of significant degrees of adaptation: the “McDonald’s solution.” By contrast, a network design strives for both fidelity and adaptation, then tries to manage the tension between them with principled conversation, collaborative decision-making, the development of a strong culture (in lieu of a tight structure), and a balanced effort to draw on both local and national expertise (Lieberman and Grolnick, 1996).

This is demanding work. What makes it even more demanding (and risky) in the case of NWP is that it is a network of school-university partnerships. Lieberman and Wood (2003) detail the challenges involved in maintaining school-university partnerships. Among them are the tendencies of universities to disparage practitioner-generated knowledge, to regard the teaching of writing anywhere—including the university—as low-status work, to consider even long-standing field-focused projects as marginal to the university’s business, and to discount—in the form of tenure and promotion decisions—the work of building and maintaining such projects. Comparable challenges originate on the school side of the relationship. For example, many districts and schools seem incapable of investing in long-term instructional improvement or in long-term external relationships. A combination of “policy churn” (Hess, 1999) and unstable leadership preclude both.

Despite these challenges, NWP was founded as and remains a school-university partnership because the reform of writing instruction necessarily involves schools and universities. NWP draws on research, proceeds through teacher education, and aims to influence teaching practice and student learning across virtually all subjects from preschool to graduate school. It has had to face the risks involved in spanning educational boundaries. At the same time, it tries to turn these risks to advantage. That is, it encourages local sites to embrace their marginality, to define themselves as intermediary organizations—neither wholly of the university nor wholly of the school districts with which they work. Indeed, sites whose directors have regular faculty

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appointments usually have co-directors whose roots are in the K–12 system. As borderland organizations, writing project sites enjoy a certain amount of license as catalysts for change that would be impossible if their identity were less ambiguous (McDonald, McLaughlin, and Corcoran, 2000). They employ resources NWP has raised, in addition to those they raise themselves, and these resources give them clout. They are presumed free of the ordinary institutional interests and political pressures that might affect them were they entirely part of or dependent on either the university that gives them a home or the schools that give them work.

Like many other “irregular organizations,” writing project sites cross boundaries to inspire vision; to focus change; to lend support for change efforts; and, at least implicitly, to apply pressure for change (McDonald, McLaughlin, and Corcoran, 2000).

Practices of Scaling Down

The approach to reform that we have explored above in the NWP experience addresses the problem of ensuring that, as a reform extends its reach, it also attends to depth. It presumes that depth requires individual practitioners to face real risks that challenge their beliefs and habits to bring important benefits to their students. How exactly does scaling down work? What are its practices? What must reformers learn to do if they wish to work in this way? We conclude this chapter with five principles that respond to these questions. Drawn from nearly 30 years of NWP experience, these principles contribute to what we hope will be an ongoing effort by researchers, reformers, and practitioners to explore further what we have begun to explore in this chapter.

Design for Teachers at the Center

Throughout his memoir about NWP, James Gray makes a point of portraying the writing project as an effort by teachers to educate themselves. It is a countercultural notion in education to think that the center of reform invention should be further down the organizational chart than reformers often place it. Yet research on high-performing organizations in other sectors of the economy has long suggested that the best ideas for change come from those closest to the problem (Applebaum et al., 2000).

The focus on teachers as agents of reform does not mean, however, that teachers should educate themselves without benefit of others’ expertise. In NWP’s version of scaling down, teachers filter others’ expertise through their own experience, but the status of their own experience as a potential source of insight is equal to that of outside experts. This is why teachers in the summer institutes not only read research about the teaching of writing but also share with each other their own expertise in the teaching of writing. They do so within a learning context deliberately designed to value perspectives from both sources.

Beyond the summer institute, NWP’s reliance on teacher-consultants as the principal agents of reform ensures that perspectives from classroom practice continue to inform professional development efforts. Lieberman and Wood (2003, p. 7) note that site directors and veteran teacher-consultants “remain consciously faithful to the highly participatory, teacher-centered design” that James Gray and the first cohort of 25 teachers in the Bay Area originally developed for their summer institute.

Associate Risk with Growth

As is true in other fields, scaling down in education presumes that significant change requires more than just direction and support. It also requires a significant shift in thinking and new insights on the part of the learner. To support practitioners in their efforts to take risks, and thus help their students gain the benefits, the NWP approach cultivates and designs for a “sense of mutual commitment” (Elmore, 1996) within a professional community of practice (McLaughlin and Talbert, 2001). Local sites design programs to improve the teaching of writing through a support system for local teachers and schools. Turning ordinary professional practices into public acts requires an ongoing improvement infrastructure focused on this goal. In NWP, all the risk-taking—from writing in the summer institute to managing the “third space” of a school-university partnership—is manifestly associated with the task at hand.

Pay Attention to Social Practices

In analyzing obstacles to urban school reform, Payne and Kaba (2001, p. 12) argue that reforms often fail for want of attention to social practices. They proceed as if it does not matter, for example, that a school’s parents, teachers, and administrators all distrust each other; that racial tensions abound but go unaddressed; that a “happy talk” culture pervades relationships and insulates problems from notice and attention; or even, as the authors say, that the whole place is in a state of “collective depression.”

Scaling down must involve dealing with whatever dynamics are evident in the places where the reform aims to take hold. For this reason, scaling up must design for such involvement. In planning to take reforms to scale, reformers must organize resources such that local implementers can draw on a larger pool of expertise in dealing with social problems. Their designs must encourage identifying, discussing, and addressing social challenges. Their theories of reform must be sensitive to the influence of social customs on efforts to implement reform, particularly those associated with region, race, ethnicity, gender, and social class.

In NWP, specialized cross-site networks and national programs have played a crucial role in developing the capacity of the organization to understand and respond to social practices affecting its work.

Expect Perturbations

In work with complex systems, whether they are information systems or reform organizations, people often forget that it is in the nature of such systems to break down regularly—to become “perturbed.”

In NWP, the expectation of perturbations starts in the summer institute’s writing activities, where teachers of writing come to terms with the fact that writing is inescapably messy. They learn that writers not only expect perturbations, they know that perturbations alert them to crucial issues of meaning and organization. To a writer, something not working is not a sign of disaster but of opportunity. Teachers of writing, therefore, must design learning environments that respect writing’s natural way of signaling opportunity. Much the same can be said of reformers—they

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must design reform environments that stay alert to novel challenges and transform them into learning opportunities.

The measure of success in scaling up should not be “smooth running.” A better measure involves the degree to which reformers can identify perturbations without defensiveness. Such a measure would reveal the resourcefulness of reformers in building an improvement infrastructure, as St. John (2002) suggests.

Design for Lateral Accountability

We are accustomed to thinking of accountability exclusively in top-down terms, but the actual demands of many current reforms, including those NWP advocates, cannot be mandated, inspected, or enforced in the usual ways. That is because, as argued throughout this chapter, practitioners’ beliefs and habits are involved. Meeting the demands of reform requires a system and culture of accountability that also runs laterally because peers are in the best position to know which beliefs and habits are in place, which need to be challenged, and which need to be reinforced as a foundation for change.

McDonald et al. (2003) describe a different kind of workplace for educators:

This is one where the power to assess outcomes and to take action to improve them is distributed throughout the organization, and where the people who do the work are able, willing, and even eager—in consultation with their colleagues—to make changes as needed in order to make the work more effective.

Getting there, these authors claim, requires investing in the development of distributed facilitative leadership (Schwarz, 1994). This is the capacity at all levels of an educational organization to help colleagues inquire into the effects of their own work, to lead discussions about what they find, and to organize efforts to take action as needed to change these effects.

At both micro and macro levels, NWP was designed with distributed leadership in mind. Exemplifying this at one level is the lateral accountability of the summer institute and of site networking, where teachers share and critique each other’s writing and teaching practices. Exemplifying it at another level are the annual site reviews, in which directors of sites examine and critique each other’s work in light of common principles and aspirations, and the national programs during which local leaders pose and solve problems together.

Each of these mechanisms requires pursuing and managing risk, scaling up and scaling down.

Conclusions

Practitioners take risks and persevere with them because they are powerfully motivated to do what they know to be best for their students. The writing project model is consciously designed with this in mind. At this writing, we may be entering a new era in understanding the importance of writing and the teaching of writing. With the introduction of writing on the two national college admissions exams—the ACT Assessment in 2004 and the Scholastic Aptitude Test in 2005—the stakes involved in learning to write well will increase significantly. Opportunities to

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take the teaching of writing to scale also bring new risks, of course. Scaling up the teaching of writing in America's schools and classrooms requires steady work across all levels of schooling. It will require the efforts of everyone in the educational system—administrators, teachers, parents, students—an effort that is well worth the risk.

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