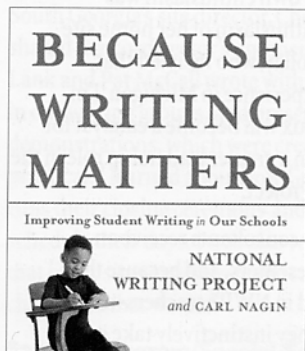


The Story Behind *Because Writing Matters*

BY MARY ANN SMITH



Imagine a publication about the teaching of writing, filled with capsule descriptions of relevant research, well-written case studies, and useful

graphics. Then imagine that the publication never makes its way to the intended audience—school administrators and policymakers. Instead, it sits on a shelf.

Almost 20 years ago, several boxes of the book *Teaching Writing: Problems and Solutions* arrived in the office of the Bay Area Writing Project (California) in preparation for an administrators conference scheduled for that year. Produced by Education News Service in Sacramento for the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), the book included interviews with Donald Graves and Donald Murray and featured the work of the writing project. In its 95 pages, it covered the waterfront on writing, so to speak, offering enough so that a principal could establish a schoolwide writing program, armed with the most current information. Unfortunately, the conference was cancelled for lack of interest. Over the years, the books disappeared into the hands of various writing project site directors and teachers, the last dozen residing in my office as a reminder of what could have been.

Through the years, as we've made a case for the National Writing Project, we've often thought of that book. As teacher-consultants have presented the importance of writing in their schools; as we've gone to Washington, D.C., to speak with our representatives about the writing project and its work; even as we have sought to inform new writing project participants—and ourselves—about the core of our work, we knew that we needed something that examines the essence of teaching writing *in writing*.

The idea of writing an up-to-date version of *Teaching Writing*, the original AASA publication, was daunting. Still, NWP leadership considered it. It would take at least a year of someone's full-time effort to do all the research, conduct interviews, and prepare case studies. The

writing itself would have to be superior. Yet if we didn't accept the challenge—and who better than NWP to do so?—how would new data and understanding ever reach the general public or inform the current debate about educational reform. We decided to take the leap and hired Carl Nagin, an educator and award-winning journalist, to work with us.

So how does a writing project write a book? Nagin interviewed over 40 people, including school administrators, faculty, and writing project teacher-consultants and directors. Among others he talked to were the Donalds—Graves and Murray—and P. David Pearson, dean of the University of California, Berkeley, Graduate School of Education. Nagin's desk—a temporary table in a crowded corner of the office—was soon buried under the books and articles we gave him to read. Every chapter he wrote went through hours of consultation with NWP staff and more revisions than any of us would want to contemplate. The manuscript was reviewed by a group of professionals, including two site directors, a classroom teacher, a principal, a school administrator, an education researcher, a university faculty member, a senior education editor, a U.S. Department of Education program officer, a foundation officer, and a corporate communications director—all of whom made valuable contributions to refining the book's content. The only easy part

of the whole process was deciding on the title—*Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools*.

Long before the book was a polished piece, we sent two chapters to Jossey-Bass, explaining in the way teachers do in a response group that these were only drafts. A senior editor from Jossey-Bass was on our doorstep shortly afterward. "How soon can you be finished?" she wanted to know.

With her guidance, we decided *Because Writing Matters* would be a trade book, available first in hardcover and later in paperback. With help from Jossey-Bass, the possibility of far-reaching dissemination for the book—a possibility that had eluded *Teaching Writing* so many years earlier—seemed within reach.

Around the office, we refer to the book as *BWM*. Appearing two decades after its predecessor, *BWM* received several early endorsements. In one of them, Donald Graves writes, "At last a book that is both comprehensive and up-to-date on the status and importance of writing in America." At last.

To learn more about *Because Writing Matters* or to order a copy, go to www.writingproject.org.

MARY ANN SMITH is a co-director of the National Writing Project and was part of the editorial team for *Because Writing Matters*.

Evaluation Figures

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investment in the writing project is one that pays off over time. As sites develop their cadre of teacher-leaders, they are able to offer more programs and reach more educators. Of the 6,114 programs offered by NWP sites in 2001-02, for example, 68 percent were offered by the 84 NWP sites that are more than 15 years old.

All of the data collected by Inverness will be of use in the months ahead, as writing project directors work to build increased capacity at local sites, better understand the development of sites, and make the case for continued federal investment in the writing project.

A more comprehensive set of figures will be posted on the NWP website in the weeks ahead at www.writingproject.org.

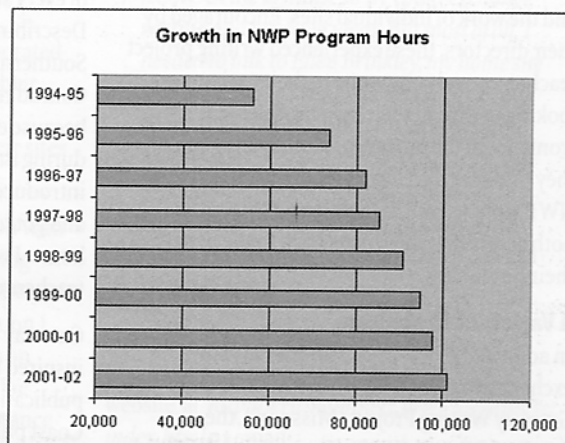


Figure 1—NWP's program hours over the last eight years