

Rural Sites Network Annual Report 2007-2008

Submitted by Joyce Sheehey and Paul Epstein

Summary of the Year's Work

Formed in 1992, the Rural Sites Network grew out of a need to improve the teaching of writing and student learning in rural schools. Today the RSN builds on the collective knowledge generated in its early years to provide support for teachers and site leaders to explore the possibilities and challenges of rural education.

To support the 2007-2008 work, our leadership team facilitated the following activities:

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| November 2007 | <p>NWP Annual Meeting, New York City, NY</p> <p>Thursday site development session: <i>The Evolving Bibliography: Rethinking Reading Lists for Rural Sites</i></p> <p>Co-sponsored the Special-Focus Networks Social</p> <p>Friday breakout session: <i>Reading the Research: Rural Leaders, Rural Places</i></p> <p>RSN Leadership Team dinner</p> <p>RSN Leadership Team Fall Strategic Planning meeting</p> <p>Review of and response to minigrant reports</p> <p>Preparation for 2008 minigrant review</p> <p>Work on RSN's "programs in action" pieces</p> <p>Continued planning of 2009 RSN Conference</p> <p>Planning 2008 Resource Development Retreat (RDR)</p> |
| January 2008 | <p>Supported electronic review of RSN minigrant proposals</p> <p>Followed up with last year's minigrant recipients on status of their work</p> |
| February 2008 | <p>Minigrant review and recommendations</p> <p>Evaluation of RFPs for the 2008 Nebraska City RDR</p> |
| March 2008 | <p>Leadership Team Strategic Planning Meeting, Kalamazoo, MI</p> <p>Evaluation of RFPs for the 2008 Nebraska City RDR</p> <p>Review of 2007 Annual Report</p> <p>Continued work on the 2008 RDR in Nebraska City; review of RFPs and selected participants</p> <p>Preparation and submission of 2008 Annual Meeting RSN-sponsored sessions</p> <p>Thursday: <i>Navigating the Rough Road to Successful Rural Inservice</i></p> |

March 2008	<p><i>Friday: Race and Diversity in Rural Places; Covering the Distance and Offering Access with Technology; Reading, Writing, and Teaching the Holocaust; and Challenges and Possibilities in Rural Education</i></p> <p>Continued work on the 2009 RSN Conference Revision of minigrant RFP and rubric/evaluation process Review of budget</p>
April 2008	National Program Leaders Meeting, Washington, DC (Paul Epstein, Joyce Sheehey, Lynette Herring-Harris)
May - June 2008	RDR planning meetings through emails and phone calls Continued preparation for 2009 RSN Conference
July 2008	Cosponsored Memorial Library Summer Seminar on Holocaust Education, New York City, July 7-19 Resource Development Retreat in Nebraska City, Nebraska - July 25-28
September 2008	National Program Leaders Meeting, Berkeley, CA (Paul Epstein, Joyce Sheehey, Lynette Herring-Harris) Developed 2009 budget and reviewed 2008 budget Reviewed minigrant progress reports for future resource development; wrote "food for thought" letters to sites

Minigrants

RSN offers annual minigrants to its member sites. Funding criteria and awards are determined through a peer-review process. RSN-sponsored minigrant work offers compelling evidence that seed money can increase site visibility, support leadership development, and change the learning environments of rural schools. Listed below are the 2008-2009 minigrant recipient sites:

University of Maine Writing Project

Montana Writing Project

Plymouth Writing Project (New Hampshire)

High Plains Writing Project (New Mexico)

Lowcountry Writing Project (South Carolina)

West Tennessee Writing Project

Central West Virginia Writing Project

For more information on RSN minigrants, please visit:
<http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/programs/rsn?x-t=grants.view>.

Resource Development Retreat

Twelve teams from eleven sites and states attended this year's Resource Development Retreat (RDR) in Nebraska City, Nebraska. The RDR schedule allowed for the consideration of the genre of resources, large group and individual work time, one-to-one coaching, and peer response and feedback. Participants left the retreat with solid drafts of resources that range from how-to manuals for creating young writer "labs" for teacher-consultants to try out new instructional practices, to wikis, to narratives that offer support for building site visibility at host universities. Leadership team members Tracy Baisden, Stephanie Vanderslice, and Joyce Sheehey staffed the retreat and coached participants prior to and during the retreat.

To support the completion of resources, the Rural Sites Network will sponsor four individuals from the 2008 RDR at the *National Programs Dissemination Retreat* in January 2009. These individuals have resources that respond to specific network needs and that are near completion. **Appendix 1** lists the sites participating in the RDR with a brief description of each resource.

Memorial Library Summer Seminar on Holocaust Education

In partnership with the Holocaust Educators Network, the RSN announced fellowships for teachers to attend the *Memorial Library Summer Seminar on Holocaust Education* in New York City. Sponsored by the Memorial Library and by Lehman College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, this seminar encourages teachers to think creatively and collaboratively about methods and approaches to teaching the Holocaust. The seminar considers how teachers use writing, dialogue, and inquiry to engage students with difficult material such as hatred, prejudice, and state-sanctioned genocide. While the focus is on the Holocaust, attention is given to more recent genocides and teaching for social justice. This year 21 teachers representing 17 sites received fellowships.

The members of the RSN leadership team are:

Joyce Sheehey, Co-chair, NWP of Vermont
Tracy Baisden, Coalfield Writers, Marshall University, WV
Paul Epstein, Co-chair, Central West Virginia Writing Project
Marla Morgan, High Plains Writing Project, NM
Stephanie Vanderslice, Central Arkansas Writing Project
Jennifer Conrad, Third Coast Writing Project, MI
Tanisha Westerfield, Mississippi State University Writing/Thinking Project
Sue McIntyre, Redwood Writing Project, CA
David Pulling, NWP of Acadiana, LA
Lynette Herring-Harris, Thinking Partner, National Writing Project
Spike Harris, Program Specialist, National Writing Project

Reflections on the Year's Work

Rural schools face many challenges. According to the National Education Association, rural schools “do more with less.” Rural educators, more so than their urban counterparts, are required to play more roles in their communities. Rural schools lack access to quality professional development offerings and are sometimes underserved by writing project sites due to distance from a university host. Rural schools and teachers can unintentionally become invisible to writing project leaders when they are working to serve both urban and rural communities. We aim our work at rural needs that influence teaching, learning, and writing project access.

RSN is greatly influenced by more than just the co-chairs and the deep thinkers of the national organization, through the regular input of the leadership team and members of the network. RSN both offers support to and is supported by local writing project sites through the administration of minigrants, acceptance of teacher-consultants to the RDR, promotion of promising site work through the publication of “programs in action” pieces, and invitation to serve on the RSN Leadership Team.

If one compares recent RSN work to that of a decade ago, one sees less emphasis on social gatherings and more emphasis on what the network can do to build resources, build leadership among rural teachers, and build capacity for site work among member sites.

Plans for the Year Ahead

The following ideals will guide our work for the year ahead. As a network, we want to do the following:

- Commit to a better understanding of diversity and equity in rural places and their impact on the teaching of writing and site leadership development
- Provide opportunities through our two-year cycle of work for network members to document and disseminate promising site practices and philosophies
- Build a more effective RSN presence on NWP's website and at the Annual Meeting
- Support RSN minigrant recipients as they carry out, document, and disseminate proposed work
- Analyze our past events and program content
- Revisit RSN goals and mission in light of network growth and changes in rural education
- More effectively work with other special-focus networks and NWP initiatives to support writing project sites with underserved rural teachers.

The coming year's work builds on what we learned this year. We will continue to support our core work: sponsoring minigrants, providing network programming that promotes site development, building teacher leadership, and creating resources focused on rural education.

The RSN's two most visible activities for the upcoming year are our sessions at the NWP Annual Meeting and the 2009 RSN Conference. These two areas of work are influenced by our core work. At our March meeting, the leadership team analyzed summaries of minigrant reports going back three years, noting that several sites had faltered or changed their original plans. We found themes and patterns in the challenges noted by the sites that received funds to create or deepen inservice programs. Out of that came our session for this year's Annual Meeting, in which we decided to write fictional case studies that contain common difficulties in rural delivery of inservice and that will encourage participants to inquire into solutions and recommendations. We will use the data from the session as a starting place to develop a resource that might support sites serving rural schools to create accessible, relevant inservice.

Minigrant reports and our leadership team readings show us that the face of rural education is changing. Our most visible event for the upcoming year reflects this awareness. On March 13–14, 2009, the Third Coast Writing Project at Western Michigan University will host the 2009 Rural Sites Conference. The conference theme is "Open Spaces and Small Cities: The Landscape of Rural Education."

Karen Vocke, keynote speaker, will also lead a pre-conference session devoted to helping teachers better understand the literacy needs of migrant students, who often speak a language other than English. Other pre-conference events include a New-Teacher Initiative workshop, a Digital Storytelling mini-institute, a visit to a local school, and a writing marathon. We have also identified the next two conference host sites. In 2011, Great Bear Writing Project (AR) will host the event, and we've planned a venue visit for January 2009. Boise State University Writing Project (ID) will host the 2013 conference.

We will again cosponsor the *Memorial Library Summer Seminar on Holocaust Education* by advertising the event to our network members and providing an online discussion board to support the community after the event.

Rural Sites Network Annual Report 2007-2008: Appendix 1

Site/State	Number Attending	Resource Description
Great Bear Writing Project/Arkansas	2	Created a “how-to” kit for planning school-based young writers camps that double as lab schools for teachers consultants
Boise State Writing Project/Idaho	2	Documented materials, presentations, and readings specific to rural education that might be used to generate Teacher Inquiry Communities in rural schools
Western Kentucky Writing Project/Kentucky	1	Created a PowerPoint presentation and facilitation guide to promote teacher leadership within a school and writing project
Eastern Kentucky Writing Project/Kentucky	2	Created a Web-based resource featuring the creation of wikis to promote greater involvement during and after an Invitational Summer Institute
Third Coast Writing Project/Michigan	2	Documented materials and resources used in the site’s 3-day mini-institute designed to help rural teachers build meaningful learning environments for English Language students; prepared draft for an RSN conference session on the same topic
Montana Writing Project/Montana	1	Continued work on a virtual Gallery Walk to “deconstruct” the myths associated with American Indians and to respond to Montana’s Indian Education for All laws
Tar River Writing Project/North Carolina	2	Two resources: (a) a study of young writers’ camps across the country that will help the site develop their own camp; (b) a resource designed to help teacher-consultants create writing centers using student tutors
Nebraska Writing Project/Nebraska	1	Reviewed their site’s online Rural Institute specializing in place-conscious education and developed promotional materials for course (syllabus, etc.)
High Plains Writing Project/New Mexico	2	Documented a site-based inquiry process that uses local context as the lens for ongoing evaluation and redesign of summer institute reading lists. (Will attend the 2009 NPSD Dissemination Retreat)
High Plains Writing Project/New Mexico	2	Documented a partnership program between the writing project, International Reading Association, and local libraries in which teacher-consultants facilitate book study groups for teachers, students, and community members
Oklahoma State Writing Project/Oklahoma	2	Created a how-to guide of promising practices for building writing project visible at host university. (Will attend the 2009 NPSD Dissemination Retreat)
Central West Virginia Writing Project/WV	2	Developed a conference session that shares a structure for an Advanced Institute that supports teacher-consultants committed to marketing, selling, and facilitating school-based inservice.