Report Finds NWP Helps Improve Student Achievement

In 1999, the National Writing Project commissioned an independent evaluator, the Academy for Educational Development (AED), to conduct a three-year evaluation of the work of NWP. The project had some specific concerns. How does student writing develop in the classroom? What conditions support student achievement in writing, and, specifically, how are NWP teachers' best practices contributing?

In February 2002, AED released its second-year evaluation report, focusing on the work of 35 third and fourth grade NWP-affiliated teachers in five states.* Analyzing assignments and student writing samples from this group, the evaluators found significant differences when contrasting the work of NWP teachers and other third and fourth grade teachers. The evaluators looked specifically at classroom practices, writing assignments, and student achievement and found:

- NWP teachers in the study spent far greater time on writing than most teachers at the same grade level. Of NWP third and fourth grade teachers in self-contained classrooms, 77 percent spent more than 90 minutes a week on writing, compared with only 31 percent of fourth grade teachers who responded to the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) survey of writing practices.

- A majority of assignments from these NWP teachers gave students opportunities to apply knowledge and skills. A high percentage (86 percent) of NWP teacher assignments had some expectation for students to construct knowledge by interpreting, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing information rather than simply reproducing it. The same percentage of assignments asked students to connect writing topics to their lives, experiences, observations, and feelings.

- NWP teachers helped students improve writing performance. Using baseline and follow-up writing prompts to measure students' writing progress from fall 2000 to spring 2001, the study found that 89 percent of third-graders and 81 percent of fourth-graders reached adequate or strong

* Chief readers Bill Thomas and Jo Fyfe led the summer scoring sessions for the AED Study.

See AED Report, page 21
AED Report
continued from page 6

analyze student assignments and writing in their own classrooms.

“I have really been able to see how important the criteria are when constructing writing lessons,” wrote one teacher. “My thoughts about teaching have once again been challenged, broadened, and enlightened by the writing project.”

“Imagine if this type of discussion [focused on common language from the rubrics] and analysis took place among teachers in a school with their own work and assignments,” wrote a teacher-scorer from the Louisville Writing Project. “I feel this insight would develop more reflection, analysis, and insight in teachers on why they do what they do…. This type of professional development would empower teachers to be more proactive in their growth.”

This is just what NWP hopes will happen. “We asked participants to think about how we can help sites apply the study’s findings as well as the evaluation process,” said Marci Resnick, an associate director of the National Writing Project. And at this fall’s annual meeting in Atlanta, MSU Writing/Thinking Project (Mississippi) director Kim Patterson will offer a workshop devoted to rubrics for evaluating student writing based on lessons learned from the AED study.

“Writing project teachers,” said Judy Buchanan, NWP co-director, “have been involved in thinking about rubrics for some time. We’ve learned how important it is for teachers, especially in this era of high-stakes testing, to be involved in the developmental phase of testing and evaluating writing. It’s important for them to have a chance to discuss assignments and reflect on the explicit demands and how they are framed. It helps them make better assignments. That’s another important lesson the AED study has helped us to understand.”

* Participants in the year-two study included teachers in urban, rural, and suburban public schools in California, Kentucky, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania. In three-quarters of those classrooms, nearly half the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

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Apart from the results of the timed writing prompts in persuasive writing, AED collected two classroom assignments from every participating teacher, along with corresponding final drafts of student work. The rubrics, or criteria used for evaluating this work, were adapted from findings in a 1998 Annenberg report from the Consortium of Chicago School Research. That research correlates student achievement in writing to the quality of classroom assignments, especially where intellectual work is built into assignments and writing activities. The rubric gave highest marks to assignments that resembled the kind of problem-solving in which adults engage in their everyday lives, the goal being to prepare students to be critical, analytical thinkers.

In June, in preparation for its final report, AED held a scoring conference to evaluate assignments and student writing. At the conference, NWP teacher-scorers from nine sites participated in a training session focused on the rubrics used for evaluating this classroom work. At the end of the conference, teacher-scorers were asked to reflect on the scoring process and how it had affected their thinking about writing assignments, particularly in the area of persuasive writing. Many felt they could use the same criteria to