The Writing on the Walls

Annual Writing Fair Involves Community in Celebration of Writing

BY JACKIE WESSON

On a balmy night in May 2000, visitors walked the halls of our school reading the walls. Hundreds of folks had responded to our invitation, “Come to Lee and you will see the Writing on the Walls!” Robert E. Lee Elementary in Satsuma, Alabama, had asked all of Mobile County to attend our annual writing fair. Now in its third year, the fair received more than 4,000 submissions of writing intended for publication on the walls of our school. These submissions were written not only by our students, but also by grandparents, parents, government officials, local business people and others. The week-long fair was highlighted by a midweek program, which provided the forum for those in our school to publicly address community members of the community and reaffirm our commitment to the improvement of writing while celebrating our progress.

Those who read the walls that May night were in for a treat. They would have seen the note sent by President Bill Clinton’s office apologizing and saying the president’s busy schedule would not allow him the opportunity to write but that he commended our school for its dedication to writing improvement. A number of poems written by State Representative Jeanette Greene hung on the walls near a moving piece from a local pastor. Submissions from grandparents spoke of the depression, World War II, and love for their grandchildren. One kindergarten class wrote “Letters to Daddy” and published them beside the emotional responses of the fathers. A first grade class wrote delightful suggestions for ways to spend $100.

The idea of a writing fair came from a brainstorming session of the Mobile Bay Writing Project (MBWP) as we searched for ways to involve the community in our work to improve the writing of students. Our goal was to find a way to showcase the progress made by our students and teachers with the help of workshops, inservices, and miniconferences offered by our site.

As our program has grown and been replicated by other schools in the Mobile County Public School system as well as by private and parochial schools, the MBWP, in conjunction with the South Alabama Regional Inservice Center, now offers inservice to schools interested in the idea of a writing fair. Here is some of what we have learned about organizing such a program.

A fast start is critical. Administrators need to plan school calendars early in the school year, and teachers benefit from lots of advance notice. We set a date late in the school year so teachers have the opportunity to show their students’ improvement from the beginning of the year with “before and after” displays of work. However, we did not set the event so late in the year that it interfered with the closing of school. This year, I met with the Parent Teacher Organization, to schedule the fair to coincide with a regular PTO meeting, a move that assured parental support.

As discussion about the fair begins, we’ve found it is important to promote early on the community-involvement aspect of this program. If teachers know that the superintendent and district administrators as well as community leaders, government officials, and various media representatives will be asked to attend, they will more likely treat the fair as an important event. When the faculty, with the help of our administrator, decided on a date, we made sure that teachers were reminded of the event often.

Early on, we established committees. In our case, in addition to an executive committee, we have publicity, program, display, and documentation committees. Volunteer chairpersons gave us a core of people committed to the success of the project and to the many small tasks that make a difference: fliers need to be posted, judges need to be invited, microphones and podiums for speakers need to be set up.

We gave ideas to teachers who needed support. Some teachers incorporated ideas that required parental involvement, such as “Letters to Daddy/Letters from Daddy,” I shared with my
colleagues one of my ideas for getting family members involved. As part
of a science unit on hurricanes, my class was asked to bring in accounts
of hurricanes written by their adult relatives who had personally
experienced this phenomenon. These pieces were written early in the year,
but they were saved for the fair.

As to what went up on the walls, there were very few rules. Some classes
displayed current work, others a variety of writing done over the year.
Teachers were limited only by the space assigned for each class.

One rule to which we held fast was that all students needed to post a piece
of writing. When students are writing for a real audience, of their parents,
community leaders, and media representatives, we've found students are
motivated to do their best work.

Some of the upper-grade students contacted celebrities to ask for writing
samples. Race-car drivers and professional wrestlers wrote to students in
support of the program. Although most
were just notes or letters to the student,
these were displayed as forms of writing. To
involve the workers of a new steel mill in
the area, second-graders wrote asking for
information on the production of steel. The
responses they received from workers and
supervisors were informative and inspirational. Faculty members submitted
writing also—letters to students or parents,
poems, personal essays.

To motivate teachers to give extra time and
attention to the display of students' work,
we offered a prize for the best display.
Faculty members, such as those in physical
education and special education, who were
not involved with displays, were asked to
determine based on attractiveness of the display
and the quality of the student writing.
However, no student writing was
individually judged.

A prize was awarded to the class with the
highest representation of parents at the
opening program. At the event, the Mobile
Bay Writing Project awarded stickers
proclaiming "I am an author" to all students
and community members who had
submitted work.

The opening program also included
encouraging comments from Mary Beth
Culp, director of the Mobile Bay Writing
Project, as well as from local published author Barbara Simms, who held a
book signing in the foyer of the school after the program. Visitors were
offered light refreshments and invited to browse the hallways to read the
submissions. Because there was so much to read, many came back during
the week to spend more time with the work.

Writing on the Walls provided a revelation of the success of our teachers
and students as writers and demonstrated the importance of the work of
the Mobile Bay Writing Project in highlighting the essential role of writing
in literacy education.

The project has served as an avenue for self-expression, a trip down
memory lane, and a highway to future dreams. It offers these
opportunities not only to our students but also to our faculty and
community at large.

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