

NWP Evaluation Shows Promising First-Year Results

By ROXANNE BARBER

Early results of NWP's national evaluation are in, and they show that students of writing project teachers made significant progress in writing during the first year of the study.

In 24 classrooms in four states, 583 third and fourth grade students of writing project teachers responded to timed writing assignments, or prompts, in the fall of 1999 and again in spring 2000. Almost all fourth-graders (96%) and most third-graders (85%) reached adequate or strong achievement for "rhetorical effectiveness" by the follow-up prompt. The first-year results also show that more than four-fifths (82%) of fourth-graders and two-thirds (66%) of third-graders demonstrated general or strong control of the writing conventions of usage, mechanics and spelling. And the majority of student scores showed statistically significant increases for both rhetorical effectiveness and writing conventions from the baseline to follow-up assessment.

The study also found that in schools where at least half of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (low SES), a larger percentage of students improved their scores in both rhetorical effectiveness and writing conventions, compared to students in higher SES schools. And English language learner (ELL) students in the study demonstrated greater gains than non-ELL students, showing larger numbers of high

scores and larger point gains for rhetorical effectiveness at the follow-up prompt.

In addition to measuring student writing achievement, the three-year evaluation, conducted by the Academy for Educational Development (AED), will collect data on teacher assignments and student work corresponding to those assignments. These findings on how student writing is developed in the classrooms and the conditions that support student achievement in writing will be released in later reports.

Writing project sites in four states participated in the first year of the evaluation: UCLA Writing Project, Mississippi Writing/Thinking Project, Oklahoma State University Writing Project, and Philadelphia Writing Project. Sites and classrooms were selected to represent a diverse sample in terms of location, setting, size of district, size of school, racial/ethnic makeup, and number of ELL students. Thirteen schools were in urban areas, eight in rural areas, and three in the suburbs. In three-fourths of the schools, more than 50 percent of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

The participating students were roughly equal numbers of males and females, and slightly more third-graders (58%) than fourth-graders (42%). Thirty-five percent of the students were white, one-third were African American, 22 percent Latino/Hispanic, and 10 percent of

another racial/ethnic background. About one-fourth of the students were English language learners, predominantly Spanish-speaking.

All of the 24 writing project teachers who participated in the study had attended a summer institute and were actively involved in their local sites. Twenty-nine percent of the teachers had between 4 and 10 years of teaching experience, 38 percent had between 11 and 20 years of experience, and the remaining third had more than 20 years of teaching experience. Over three-fourths were white, 8 percent were African American, 8 percent Latino/Hispanic, and 4 percent of another background.

The student writing was scored by 25 experienced elementary teachers from six writing project sites.

The second year of the AED evaluation will collect data from 30 third and fourth grade classrooms and will include the Louisville Writing Project in Kentucky in addition to the first-year sites. Each year's assessment will involve a new set of students.

For more information about the evaluation, or to receive a copy of the first-year report, please contact the NWP office at (510) 642-0963. Results of the study will also be available online in spring 2001 through the NWP Web site at www.writingproject.org.