

Director's Update



Executive Director Richard Sterling

Dear Colleagues and Friends:

At a national conference in San Francisco in 1977, I had a life-changing experience. My colleagues John Brereton and Sondra Perl and I were at the Conference on College Composition and Commu-

nication to present our research findings drawn from a project we had been conducting while we were faculty members at three different branches of the City University of New York (CUNY). We had been investigating how CUNY freshmen, admitted under the open admissions program, became proficient writers. At the conclusion of our session, Jim Gray, director of the Bay Area Writing Project, and Mary K. Healy, the project's codirector, approached us and asked a simple question. "Would you folks like to start a writing project?"

At the time, we had no idea what a "writing project" was. We also knew little of schools and of teachers in public schools. Yet, for reasons that I am unsure of even to this day, we said yes to Jim's offer. A few months later, in the summer of 1978, the first invitational institute of the New York City Writing Project was underway.

Perhaps the reason John, Sondra, and I felt connected with Jim and his colleagues in their still-fledgling endeavor was the belief we shared with them that most professional educators, and indeed the public at large, failed to recognize the impact that writing has on learning. Many of our students appeared to have had little or no opportunities to write extensively in or out of school. Those teachers who did care about teaching writing had developed strategies in isolation from their colleagues, creating their own theory of action, finding their way by trial and error. And no one asked these teachers to share their hard-won knowledge.

It was Jim Gray's vision to turn the body of knowledge and expertise that existed in classrooms everywhere into a model for professional development. Teachers knew things that people on the other side of the classroom door did not. So why not ask teachers to share their knowledge?

From the beginning, Jim knew he was on to something. He never had any doubts that the writing project model would succeed. One wonders, though, if he understood just how successful it would be. The project that began in 1974 with one site at the University of California,

Berkeley, has grown to 167 sites at colleges and universities in forty-nine states and Puerto Rico. Years before I arrived to assume, on Jim's retirement, the position of NWP executive director, the federal government had recognized the writing project's important work and provided us with funding, and this funding has increased steadily.

Central to Jim's work is the key idea that teachers must be honored for their commitment, knowledge, and creativity. We are now pleased to honor Jim as we celebrate the publication of his book, *Teachers at the Center: A Memoir of the Early Years of the National Writing Project*. Published by NWP, this new book offers Jim's account of how the concept of teachers teaching teachers, and other key writing project ideas, evolved. Even though these ideas have been refined over the years, and even though the writing project has expanded beyond its original boundaries, the writing project model remains much as it was explained to us back in 1978.

Please join us at the authors' celebration at our annual meeting in Milwaukee—Jim's home town—on Friday night, November 17, at the Pfister Hotel, to honor Jim and other NWP authors. And be sure to stop by our booth to get a signed copy of Jim's book.

I look forward to seeing you there!