Project Outreach Transforms Professional Development
A Report from Johnston County

by Patsy Butler and Sandra O’Berry

Poor students, poor schools, poor test scores—especially in writing. Johnston County, North Carolina, was on every poor list in the state. County commissioners, good ole boys who had been in office for years, held the purse strings, preventing any improvements in education. The schools, they said, had been good enough for them and they were good enough for their grandchildren.

The western part of the county was changing, however, as the I-40 corridor opened and newcomers poured into the area to live cheaply while commuting to their jobs in Wake County and the Research Triangle Park. These folks, irate over the condition of the schools, went to the polls to ensure that bond issues for building new schools passed. Even with new schools under construction everywhere, we were still considered poor; students in the rest of the county were poor, and our test scores needed improvement.

In 1995, the NWP issued an invitation to apply to the Project Outreach Network (PON), an effort which would bring together 18 writing project sites to focus on extending the quality and quantity of services to teachers of poor children.

Thanks to Project Outreach, we have a model in place for professional development that can continue independently of the network. Work that began in despair and frustration has grown and gained momentum that will allow it to continue for years to come.

As teachers in the Johnston Area Writing Partnership (JAWP), a satellite of the Capital Area Writing Project (CAWP) in Raleigh, we thought we met the criteria. Our PON proposal was accepted, and a local leadership team with one representative for each of the six Smithfield-Selma schools, the poorest in the system, was established. Not fully understanding what we were getting into, we headed off to the first Project Outreach summer institute at the Chauncey Center in Princeton, New Jersey.

For the Chauncey retreat each group was asked to bring artifacts representing their work. Our opening assignment was to use these items to create a storyboard that would be a visual representation of our site. Along with pictures of our schools, our display consisted of a tobacco leaf (after all, we are from tobacco country), pictures of hogs (the I-95 corridor is known as "Hog Alley" because of all the hog farms), a picture of Ava Gardner (born and buried in Johnston County), and a picture of Jesse Helms (why not?).

After we completed our storyboard, we took a look at the displays of the more established sites. Although we were intimidated by the thick notebooks documenting numerous professional development sessions, brochures, collections of student writing, pins, T-shirts, publications of teacher strategies, and newsletters, we could see definite possibilities for JAWP.

We knew in more ways than one that we were in the Land of Smart People. We were in Princeton, New Jersey (we had a Princeton in Johnston County—population 1,500, with one school, K-12), home of a prestigious university and the Educational Testing Service. We felt like the dumbest six people at Chauncey. Everywhere people talking about teacher reSEARCH (REsearch to us). As we listened to buzzwords like "data," "inquiry," and "documenting impact," we realized this reSEARCH was not about looking stuff up in encyclopedias.

Soon we were surrounded by paper, documents that were supposed to help us formulate some sort of plan for studying our site and seeing what improvements we would want to make. We took one look at these overwhelming piles of information and developed an alternative strategy: We went shopping. But this diversion didn’t work for long, and we were just as confused when we returned. We went to supper. We went to the bar. Our feelings of intimidation and ignorance made it impossible for us to focus.

Desperate, we laughed to keep from crying. We reflected. We took notes and wrote in our journals: "We don’t know squat about teacher reSEARCH, and everyone here is doing it." We also made entries that suggested we were beginning to understand: "You have to think about what you do as a teacher as much as you think about what your students do." We kept attending workshops and meetings. We listened carefully.

Once more we spread out our notes and charts and reread the PON goals. We began to come to an understanding that was not yet clear enough to express. Grabbing fresh sheets of chart paper, we started writing. It was like building a plane as it taxied down the runway: risky, but we hoped it would fly.

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Armed with both goals and new ideas, we returned to Johnston County to survey, observe, and study our site. We found out why people came to JAWP activities and why they did not. We assessed the needs of students and teachers. We found that teachers were not using a variety of prewriting activities, so students were not adequately planning their writing. Students were not revising because teachers did not know exactly what revising meant. Very few teachers knew how to use peer groups as a means of helping students figure out what a paper needed.

We found that people who had attended a writing project summer institute thought they did not know enough about teaching writing and that people who had not attended a summer institute thought they knew everything.

At the next PON summer institute in 1997, we were better prepared. We had a brochure, a newsletter, articles about our work, a mission statement, a vision statement, a list of goals and recommendations for our county office, and so many other artifacts to add to our storyboard. We had a good idea about what we wanted to do, but we had questions about how to do it.

One activity in particular, the interpretive circle, moved us toward implementation. In the interpretive circle each site was allotted 90 minutes to present questions to the entire PON group and to seek the advice of an interested, supportive team. When it came our turn, we wanted to know: “How can we manage our time to meet the professional development needs of teachers in our community?” and “How can we empower other TCs to provide professional development at their schools?”

We also thought we could improve our professional development if we drew on the experience our colleagues had had in professional development situations, so we asked “What is the best professional development you have ever been part of?”

The people who attended our session listened and gave us good advice, the best of which became our mantra: Manage other people’s time by focusing on what is important to them. The county mandate for writing-test improvement was certainly important to the teachers we worked with, so we offered a menu of 24 presentations related to helping teachers help students improve their writing, keeping in mind those traits on which the writing test is scored. From our menu, teachers could create professional development plans which met their individual needs.

We returned to Johnston County and put our plan into action. At the end of the series, our teachers responded that they loved the fact that presenters were local teachers who had actually taught the lessons and knew they worked. They loved the fact that they were asked to do what they would be asking students to do.

The presenters loved being seen as teacher-leaders who were given the opportunity to show off their knowledge and their students’ work.

We loved seeing large numbers of teachers attending the workshops, learning, and enjoying themselves.

We enjoyed both positive results on the state writing test and positive feedback: “Thanks so much for the ideas you shared at JAWP. This year 78 percent of my class scored better than 2.5 on the writing test.” “I had a low class and 67 percent of my students scored well on the test. The JAWP sessions helped me tremendously.” “Eighty-six percent of my kids were proficient.”

With results like these, we were not surprised when 82 teachers attended the first session of our expanded series. We are now involved in a new menu for the school year that complements the current literacy effort underway in our county while maintaining the principles of sound writing instruction that the National Writing Project embraces.

Thanks to Project Outreach, we have a model in place for professional development that can continue independently of the network. Work that began in despair and frustration has grown and gained momentum that will allow it to continue for years to come.

We haven’t performed miracles in Johnston County, but we have been spreading the news about teaching reading and writing. Word of our accomplishments has spread throughout the CAWP service region, and other areas are looking at our program as a model. We are currently preparing to work in other counties where we will conduct needs assessments, lead summer institutes, and work with local CAWP TCs to replicate our program.

The PON team knows from this experience that we have successfully made the change in our roles from teachers to district leaders of professional development—the best kind of professional development, teachers teaching teachers. We know that, in a school system, change can be short-term or slow and incremental. We also know that powerful change can be catalyzed by the unexpected, as two dramatic hurricanes—Fran and Floyd—have recently reminded all who live in this part of North Carolina. We are, however, ready for all these changes as long as our cooperative spirit continues to bring us together in a common purpose: improving instruction for children.

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