

# Urban Sites Network Annual Report 2008-2009

## Submitted by Benjamin Bates and Astra Cherry, Program Co-chairs

### Summary of the Year's Work

The founding objectives of the Urban Sites Network (USN) are still actively guiding our work as we enter our third decade. Below is a description of USN's activities during the 2008-2009 program year.

- Jul–Oct 2008      Planning and preparation via e-mail and conference calls for USN-sponsored Annual Meeting sessions; Planning for USN conference 2010, Portland, Oregon begins: conducted conference venue tours and met with local site conference planning team (Ben Bates, Vanessa Brown, and Nicki Lewis); confirmed keynote speaker and hotel accommodations; began planning program activities and identifying site leaders
- November 2008      USN Network presence at Annual Meeting: *Appreciative Inquiry into Site Development: Attracting Diverse Leadership*; *Special Focus Network Minigrants: How to Access Supplemental Funding to Grow Your Site Strategically*; *Hard Talk: Conversations about Teaching, Writing, and Learning*; *Reading the Research: Resiliency*; Cosponsor for Special-Focus Networks Social, SFN PowerPoint presentation
- Fall USN Leadership Team meeting (at Annual Meeting)  
                            Writing and sharing: What does resiliency look like in urban writing projects?; 2008-2009 Minigrants; Update on the African American Learners Project; Resource development for urban Writing Project sites: Programs-in-action, Open forum listserv
- January 2009      Planning calls with 2009 USN Conference host site and workshop proposal review with host site; Minigrant review and recommendations
- February 2009      Annual Review and Minigrant Coordinators meeting in Berkeley for final selections of minigrant recipients; Annual Meeting Program Committee Launch, USN proposed five sessions for 2009 AM program
- March 2009      Christina Puntel, Minigrant Coordinator, begins follow-up work with minigrant recipients. This work is ongoing throughout the year.
- April 2009      USN Conference, Louisville, KY: Theme: *Writing and Resiliency: Tapping the Potential of Urban Students*; Keynote speaker: Bonnie Benard; school visits, writing marathons, walking tours of downtown Louisville; Evening reception and dinner with entertainment; Open Mic at the Hyatt Spire – post dinner gathering; 4 rounds of interactive workshop sessions; Town Meeting; More than 300 persons in attendance at Friday and Saturday activities; Launch 2010 conference

Spring USN Leadership Team meeting (at USN Conference)  
Identified program leaders for 2009; Minigrant review; Writing up of resources; Identified sessions and possible presenters for 2009 Annual Meeting; Update on Louisville conference; 2010 conference theme and activity plans debriefed, Theme: “Writing Across the Margins: Illuminating the Voices of Urban Students”; Friday Technology pre-conference strand at 2010 conference – Paul Oh shared preliminary idea and requested feedback and/or recommendations (will be planned in collaboration with Tech Liaison Network; Digital Is...; Sharing our stories; Energizing the USN discussion forum; Minigrant reports; Reviewed and debriefed USN work at the 2008 NWP Annual Meeting in San Antonio; Updates/Next steps; Webcast on resiliency; Benefits to sites for joining USN; Minigrant review committee; Leadership team changes/rotations/work plans; Budget

Annual Spring Meeting in Washington, DC: NPL meeting and midyear budget check

- May 2009 Ben Bates and Vanessa Brown continue to confer with 2010 conference host on details of USN conference with the assistance of Program Assistant, Nicki Lewis; Submitted proposals for 2009 Annual Meeting workshop sessions: *Using Inquiry Groups to Address Burning Questions About School Relationships*; *Building Reflective Practice: Stories of Coaching and Facilitation in Large Urban Centers*; *The Pedagogy of Facilitation: A Way of Thinking about Facilitation*; *Revision: Teaching the Writer, Not the Writing*; *Resiliency and Reform: Strange Bedfellows in an Era of High Stakes*
- August 2009 Throughout August and September, the team developed plans for Annual Meeting workshops and the USN LT meeting using email and conference calls.
- Sept-Nov 2009 National Program Leaders Meeting, Berkeley, CA (Ben Bates, Astra Cherry and Vanessa Brown): Reviewed progress and final reports from USN minigrant recipients. Ben Bates and Astra Cherry mined the reports for future resource development, wrote letters to sites with feedback and suggestions; Met with Tech Liaisons Network NPL co-chairs and thinking partner to discuss details of a new pre-conference event to be held on Friday, April 23, 2010. Finalized USN conference documents (logo, registration and call for proposals) with host site for 2010 conference; Conference documents for 2010 posted on NWP/USN events page; Venue visit to 2011 conference host site, Boston Area Writing Project; Met with local host site conference planning and local leadership teams to discuss

background of the USN conference along with mission and goals of the annual conference; Continued coaching and final planning for 2009 Annual Meeting workshop sessions.

The members of the 2009-2010 USN Leadership team are:

**Ben Bates**, Oklahoma State University Writing Project, Co-Chair

**Astra Cherry**, Gateway Writing Project (MO), Co-Chair

**Linda Christensen**, Oregon WP at Lewis and Clark College

**Dewayne Dickens**, Oklahoma State University Writing Project

**Irina McGrath**, Louisville Writing Project

**Michael Prier**, Greater Kansas City Writing Project

**Chris Tsang**, Boston Writing Project

**Vanessa Brown**, National Writing Project, Thinking Partner

**Nicki Lewis**, National Writing Project, Program Specialist

Recent additions to the leadership team have been coordinated with plans for future Urban Sites Conferences; that practice will continue. At our November meeting we will also discuss extending the three-year term for team members to four years, to enable leadership team members to contribute more broadly to national programs, as minigrant coordinator or USN co-chair, for example, once their work as conference liaison has been completed.

### **Reflections on the Year's Work**

To illustrate our work during 2008-2009, this report will touch on three of our major initiatives: the process by which the 2009 Urban Sites Network Conference, held in Louisville, KY on April 24 and 25, was planned and implemented; our minigrant program; and participation by three leadership team members at the National Programs Dissemination Retreat.

#### *Urban Sites Network Conference*

This annual conference provides a local host site with the opportunity to hold an urban-focused, NWP-sponsored event that encourages continuity, builds the local teacher-consultant network, and attracts prospective TCs to the Invitational Summer Institute. The conference also enhances NWP's reputation as a provider of professional development with district administrators, community organizations, and politicians. These benefits accrue from the actions of dedicated, enthusiastic groups of local teachers like those who worked on the 2009 conference, which was hosted by the Louisville Writing Project.

USN Co-chair Ben Bates and USN Thinking Partner Vanessa Brown visited Louisville in February 2008 and saw firsthand how planning the conference can energize a site. The conference theme, "Writing and Resiliency: Tapping the Potential of Urban Students" emerged from the inquiry, research, and classroom practice of Louisville teachers, who had studied the work of Bonnie Benard and wanted to promote teaching that sets high expectations and clear boundaries for students and provides opportunities for meaningful participation and development

of life skills in a caring, supportive environment. The conference theme was a direct response to local teacher concerns.

Planning and staging such a diverse schedule of activities both challenges and invigorates the host site. The Louisville Writing Project conference planning committee (Irina McGrath, Maria Scherrer, Linda Satterlee, Maxine Mellman and Connie McKinley) demonstrated imagination and attention to detail throughout. Routine planning tasks became opportunities for outreach to potential partners and supporters in the region. More than 300 participants came to Louisville to see urban teachers share their work, exchange ideas, write, read, listen, and learn from each other.

The Louisville Writing Project did an excellent job of building and sustaining its leadership to host the annual conference. Director Jean Hicks and LT member Irina McGrath recently wrote an article about the implications that the conference has for leadership at the site. Their work confirms the strength of local Writing Project sites across the network.

### *Minigrants*

Sites that self-designate membership in the Urban Sites Network have the opportunity to apply for USN Minigrants. These minigrants encourage teacher-consultants' initiative while challenging sites to envision how seed money can be used to explore or expand an idea or project that will have an impact on the site's leadership and service area. Our minigrant cycle of work contributes to the network's goals for research and inquiry, nurtures local work, and supports efforts to disseminate it to the widest and most appropriate audience possible.

The National Programs Dissemination Retreat, the Professional Writing Retreats, the Urban Sites Network Conference, the NWP website, and the Annual Meeting are prime venues for increasing access to the knowledge, tools, resources, and expertise that sites create using these small grants.

In March 2009, the Urban Sites Network awarded \$5,000 grants to the following eight sites:

**Bay Area Writing Project (CA)**  
**Hoosier Writing Project (IN)**  
**Nebraska Writing Project**  
**National Writing Project at Rutgers (NJ)**  
**New York City Writing Project**  
**Oklahoma State University Writing Project**  
**Penn State Lehigh Valley Writing Project**  
**Upstate Writing Project (SC)**

### *Resource Development and Dissemination*

The Urban Sites Network sent three participants to the National Programs Dissemination Retreat. Chris Tsang went to work on two Program-in-Action (PIAs) pieces about 2008 Annual Meeting sessions that centered on the skillful application of Appreciative Inquiry and Hard Talk in site

development. Ben Bates went to complete an article originally drafted as part of the Thinking and Development Team of the African American Learners Project. USN also sent a writing coach to the retreat for the first time. Fellow USN LT member Linda Christensen provided valuable support to both Ben and Chris in order to ensure the completion of new drafts by the end of the retreat. Ben Bates' article, *The Path Toward Opening Night*, was recently published on the NWP website, <http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2968>, and Chris' first PIA, *Bringing Hard Talk to Your Writing Project Site*, will be published soon.