

Days in D.C. Prove Worthwhile for NWP Representatives

NWP directors, teacher consultants and supporters converged on Washington D.C. in early February for five days of celebration, introspection, and communication.

The visit began on Thursday, February 6, with celebration, as Senator Thad Cochran and Representative George Miller received NCTE's Literacy Award for their leadership in supporting the National Writing Project on Capitol Hill (see accompanying story). Following the ceremony, NCTE hosted a reception for more than one hundred NWP supporters in attendance. Mary Ann Smith, NWP co-director, described the feeling in the room as "wonderfully enthusiastic, like a sports banquet. I was thrilled to see so many people who are passionate about kids learning to read and write."

In the days following the celebration, NWP leadership went through a process of introspection by conducting the annual review of site proposals at Howard University. In the process, reviewers selected six new NWP sites (see box, page 15).

Then on Monday, February 10, about seventy NWP directors and teachers gathered to communicate the NWP message on Capitol Hill. This annual event provides an opportunity to thank individual legislators for supporting the NWP and to provide them with information on writing project activities in their districts.

To begin the day, several Congressional aides addressed the assembled NWP contingent, explaining how to communicate with legislators. One aide emphasized, "If your Congressional office doesn't know who you are, you're in trouble." The aids discussed the many different ways of communicating with legislators, and ranked the methods according to effectiveness. The rankings surprised many:

1. visits
2. phone calls
3. personal letters with follow-up calls
4. letters signed by a group of people (with titles and zip codes to determine constituency)
5. post cards

Phone calls are extremely important, the aides insisted, and personal letters to legislators must be followed by phone calls. The aides instructed NWP representatives to tell legislators what's going on at their local sites and explain why those activities are important to teachers in their area.

Bearing in mind this advice, the NWP contingent then fanned out over the Hill to talk to many legislators and their staff, provide them with information about local sites, invite them to writing project events such as the summer institute, and offer any other information they requested.

It took Josie Bourdon, the representative of the Alaska State Writing Consortium some fifteen hours to make it to D.C. for the Day on the Hill, but she

was all smiles as she made the rounds to her representatives on behalf of everyone back home. Another NWP director was delighted to learn that her legislator's daughter will be attending a summer institute in June. This kind of personal association with the writing project is the most effective tool for continued support, Smith said.

Reflecting on the success of the days spent in

D.C., Smith commented, “We usually don't undertake so many different activities in one trip. But the D.C. combination of celebration, introspection and communication is really a wonderful model of how writing projects should work — celebrating our successes, evaluating and improving our programs, and communicating our contributions to the public.”