As educational leaders in their communities, writing project teachers often embrace a variety of professional associations which may put them in touch with outstanding educators and policy makers outside the NWP circle. Karen Kinney, co-director of the Northwest Indiana Writing Project and a National Board Certified teacher, found herself in just this situation when she traveled to Washington, D.C. to attend the third annual meeting of National Board Certified Teachers. Many of her fellow board-certified teachers had little knowledge of the NWP, so Kinney took the opportunity to promote our work, both in a poster session at the NBCT meeting and in the offices of congressional aides she visited on the NBCT’s behalf. Her story serves as a reminder that the many TCs traveling across the country daily for various professional activities can serve as vital conduits for introducing remarkable teachers to the NWP.

By Karen Kinney

The National Writing Project and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards share a common belief about education: teachers are the key to improving student learning. Since I am associated with both groups, I decided to take advantage of the third annual NBCT meeting in Washington, D.C. as a forum to encourage others to become involved with the NWP. Many hadn’t heard of the NWP, the summer institutes or the opportunities for teacher leadership that the NWP offers, so as it turned out I was able to serve as an ambassador for the project in several ways.

For example, I presented a poster session called “You Can Be An Author: The National Writing Project.” The poster contained the mission statement and model for the NWP, as well as a two of the three pieces I wrote during the summer institute that pertained to National Board Certification. (I found out at the meeting that one of these pieces, “Top Ten Things to Know Before Beginning Certification,” had been published three times by the National Board in their newsletter, The Candidate Connection.)

The poster also included a list of “Four Books Only You Can Write,” which encouraged teachers to be models for their classrooms by writing books especially for their students. I displayed several books I have authored for my students. The book that prompted the most comments, Mrs. Kinney Goes to Washington, told the story of my trip to the first annual meeting of NBCT back in 1997. One woman said that she hoped I didn’t mind, but “copycat” books about this year’s conference were “going to be flying out of Washington!”

My two-hour poster session was exhilarating as I shared the NWP with teachers from all over the country. Participants took all of my 75 handouts in the first hour, so I wrote down addresses to mail copies to others. I answered questions about summer programs and encouraged teachers to find out more about their local sites when they returned home. Some teachers said they had been interested in attending a summer institute but hadn’t worked it into their schedules. Fortunately, I had brought a list of all the NWP sites, and many teachers took notes. One lady and I looked in vain for a listing in Kansas. (I was delighted to recently read in The Voice that the Kansas Writing Project will be started this summer. My colleague will now have the opportunity to become a consultant.) All in all, I felt energized and gratified by the enthusiastic response to my presentation.

In addition to the poster session, I was able to represent the NWP in the offices of my Congressional leaders. Weeks before the NBCT meeting, participants were encouraged to make appointments with Senators and Representatives from their states to discuss educational issues. Once I had scheduled these appointments, I asked my kindergarten students to draw pictures and dictate a sentence about how the legislators could help make Indiana a better place to live. The suggestions ranged from “Make animals’ teeth not so sharp so they can’t bite me as hard,” to “Help the earth smell better for the people.” I was able to deliver these gems to aides for Senators Richard Lugar and Evan Bayh and Representative Peter Visclosky. Besides talking about the National Board, I asked the aides to convey to Senator Lugar and Representative Visclosky my thanks for their sponsorship of the NWP in Congress.

When I returned home, I discovered that my opportunity to promote the NWP was not over. A teacher sent an email from Florida requesting a handout from my poster session. She had read about it on the National Board web site and wanted to try some of the ideas with her fourth-graders.

Within a few days, I received another surprise: a letter from Senator Lugar himself addressed to my students and me. In part he said: “I loved all of the pictures and have proudly shared them with family and staff. I also enjoyed reading your students’ thoughts on what could be done to make Indiana better.”

And finally, an Idaho teacher emailed me that she was writing a book about her trip to Washington, but she was having her students help her. I thought this was a perfect example of the NWP in action: teachers share ideas with other teachers who take those ideas and make them their own.

As I write about my experience at the NBCT meeting, I am once again becoming excited. The fourth Annual Meeting will be held in Orlando, Florida in October. Given the opportunity, I would be honored to present another session that could introduce and promote our outstanding organization to equally outstanding teachers.

Educate Your Legislators!

The continuing success of the National Writing Project depends not only on the quality of the work we do, it depends on the support we receive from Congress. It is up to writing project directors and teachers across the country to educate their Senators and Representatives about our work and to ask for their support.

Two bills that support the NWP are currently being considered by Congress: S514 in the Senate and HR1456 in the House. Please write to your Senators and Representatives to tell them what the writing project has meant to you, to your students, and to other teachers in your community. If you’ve never written them before, please contact your local site director for tips and sample letters. Legislators’ phone, fax and address information can be found in your local Yellow Pages, or on the congressional website at: http://thomas.loc.gov

There’s no need to ask for support from those who are already co-sponsoring our bills, so before you write, please check the current list of co-sponsors posted on the NWP web site at: http://nwp.berkeley.edu

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