

Inviting Parents In: Expanding Our Community Base to Support Writing

Families can be strong allies for excellent writing instruction. The authors describe workshops and other methods for getting parents productively involved in their children's literacy development.

I want you to try something,” Cathy announces as she looks around at the 20 or so adults—parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles¹—gathered in the school library on a Tuesday evening last winter. “Think for a minute about something you have written lately. It could be something from work or school or something personal like a letter or a eulogy.” She pauses. “Everybody got something in mind? OK, now I want you to visualize yourself writing that thing. Where were you? What were you doing as you wrote it? What happened as you wrote it? I want you to take three to four minutes to freewrite about the experience of writing that particular letter or report or whatever. Don’t worry about spelling or complete sentences or perfect grammar. I just want you to use the writing to get out some ideas. No one will read what you’ve written, but we will ask you to talk about it afterwards.”

And like magic (or so it seems), the adults start writing. They write about love letters they’ve written to their spouses, reports they’ve created for work, difficult emails they’ve sent to relatives, eulogies they’ve written for loved ones, papers they’ve composed for their college or GED classes, and more. After a few minutes, we ask them to find a place to pause in their thoughts and begin sharing what they wrote about.

Hesitantly at first, the adults look at each other. Finally, one brave woman raises her hand and begins, “Well, I wrote about the time I wrote a grant proposal for work and it took forever. I had to keep writing and showing it to my boss and my

team and they kept offering feedback. It took a lot of work and I was so proud when we got the grant.”

“Great,” Cathy responds with a smile. “Thanks for sharing this. Anybody else have something? Maybe something that was different?”

Another parent responds, “I wrote about a text I wrote in the parking lot when I was waiting to pick up my daughter the other day. It was to a friend, but we’d had some problems, so I was really careful to get it just right.”

“Another great example,” Cathy goes on. “Anybody else?” And the adults continue to share, ready to talk as they hear the examples of others. As they share, we ask them to make some connections: “I notice that a lot of you are talking about writing on computers. Do all of you write on computers?” They think for a minute, and one parent finally says, “Well, it depends on what I’m writing.”

“What do you mean?” Kim asks.

“If I’m writing something for work, it’s always on computer. But if it’s something more personal, like a letter to a friend or a letter of condolence, I use pen and paper.” Others nod heads in agreement.

“That’s really interesting. So, it depends on the audience and the genre or kind of writing? Well, what about revising? Remember how one parent just mentioned sharing her drafts of a grant proposal with coworkers and her boss and that they gave feedback that helped her revise? What about in your writing? Do you revise? And how do you do it?”

And on it goes, the parents sharing their experiences with drafting, revising, prewriting; their understanding of genre and audience; their idiosyncratic

approaches and what they have in common. Without even realizing it, these parents have captured the essence of writing through their own experiences and are now prepped to hear more about writing in schools and what they can do at home to help their children and teens with writing—the goal of this gathering.

Workshops for Parents (and Students)

This scenario is one we have repeated dozens and dozens of times over the past five years in workshops we have designed as part of our National Writing Project site, the Eastern Michigan Writing Project.

Known as the Family Literacy Initiative (FLI), the project began as a few workshops offered to parents of elementary students who wanted to know what they could do in the summer to keep their kids writing. Since that time the FLI has grown tremendously: in the past five years, we have offered 130 workshops, reaching more than 2,750 adults and students. We've grown from one-session workshops offered exclusively for parents to some for parents and children together to four-session workshops that lead to production of a parent- and student-written anthology. Most recently, we have partnered with the University Writing Center at Eastern Michigan University to create a new set of workshops that focus on teens, with

a parent version titled “How to Help Prepare Your Teen for College Writing” and a parallel offering for teens called “Preparing for College Writing.”

At the heart of these workshops is our commitment to working with parents, inviting them into what can sometimes seem the closed community of schools, a place where they may not see themselves as having a role. Teachers, overwhelmed with the day-to-day obligations of creating meaningful learning environments for their students, too often don't have the energy to do more than offer parents small

tidbits of information, perhaps through newsletters or curriculum nights. We want to suggest, though, that immersing parents in discussions of writing and offering them ways to help their own children and teens as writers can help send a message about the value of thoughtful writing instruction, a necessary message especially in the current climate.

Why Outreach to Parents Is So Important

It's a truism that working with families and learning from them about their children gives us a kind of insider knowledge about our students' learning styles and backgrounds—an insider knowledge that is invaluable in understanding what makes students tick and what ways of teaching might work best. And as a predominately white middle-class teaching force meets an increasingly diverse and multicultural student population, we need these kinds of partnerships more than ever, so that we can approach the challenges of teaching with as much knowledge and as much understanding as possible.

But we want to argue that outreach to families has other purposes as well, especially as a means of helping families understand why we teach in the ways we do. Because the ways we teach writing are often quite different from the ways most of our students' parents learned to write, these parents are sometimes understandably confused about what literacy instruction is all about: both the terminology of writing instruction (*process writing, minilessons, craft lessons*) and the best ways they can help their children or teens with their writing. Especially in an age in which many in the community get their primary information about pedagogy from newspaper accounts and legislative mandates, we think it is incredibly important for us to reach out to parents and communities to help them understand the kinds of research-based practices we know work. Think of it in two ways: We want parents to be both informed, knowledgeable readers of educational reform and potential advocates for change.

A Typical Workshop for Parents of Teens

Given the current fascination with the term *college and career readiness*,² we find it no surprise that our newest workshops for parents of teens are gaining momentum. In the pages that follow, we introduce

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the standard format we've used for this workshop, but we also want to stress that we are constantly adapting the workshops. We tweak them based on the time we have, what we know about the parents and teens in that particular setting, and what we've seen that works well in certain contexts. There really isn't such a thing as a "typical workshop" for parents of teens, but to give a sense of what can happen, we describe our basic approach.³

The goal in the workshop for parents of teens is threefold: (1) to introduce them (in parent-friendly language) to some research-based understanding of writing instruction; (2) to give them a sense of what college writing will be like (which is usually quite different from their own real or imagined experiences); and (3) to offer them some ideas of how they might support their teens in the years before college. As we do this workshop, often we have teens in the room next door having a parallel experience: first-year writing instructors from our university engage them in conversation about college writing, prompting them through fun writing activities that they might play with even after the workshop to help them become truly "college ready." Our goal has been that parents and teens might, in the car ride home, share what they've learned and continue the discussion about writing.

No matter what the context, we always begin with the prompt that introduces this article, inviting the parents to share their own writing experiences—a prompt that truly has worked almost magically in any setting we've been in. It begins the workshop with a shared experience and quickly establishes some shared language about writing. Then, drawing on what the parents have talked about, we introduce a handout about Best Practices in Writing Instruction (see figure 1). The left side (adapted from Zelman, Daniels, and Hydes's book *Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools*) summarizes for parents some research-based understandings of writing instruction that inform the ways teachers structure writing instruction in their classrooms. The right side is something we developed to adapt those understandings into parent-friendly implications: what we see as the first step in helping these adults think about what their role might be in helping their teens as writers—especially in helping them see their role as beyond "editor" of their kids' work.



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For many parents, this one handout eases tension. Convinced prior to this evening that their role had to be that of ice-cold critic, limited to correcting spelling and punctuation for their teens, parents visibly heave a sigh of relief when they hear us talk of encouraging and supporting, lavishing praise, and asking heartfelt questions. This is something they can do!

Some parents, though, are still worried. For them, these ideas seem to be too much of a "feel-good" approach, research-based though they may be. ("But what will happen to my daughter in college if she can't remember the difference between *its* and *it's*?") And so we share with them some specifics about what college writing is really like, making distinctions among the typical kinds of writing their teens will experience in college (i.e., *writing to learn* [notes, journals, freewrites], *writing to display* [essays, analyses, lab reports], *learning to write* [pieces and drafts that help students learn genres and conventions]), sharing some specific assignments gathered from various professors, and explaining how these multiple kinds of writing

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FIGURE 1. Qualities of Best Practice in Teaching Writing



**What Writing Teachers Know
(Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde)**

Implications for Parents of Teens

1. "All children can and should write" (58).	Encourage your adolescents to write—even if they struggle with the written word. In order to be successful and fluent writers, teens need to know they can write—even if their work doesn't look or sound perfect!
2. "Teachers must help students find real purposes to write" (59).	Help your teens use writing as a way to communicate their hopes, dreams, fears, and concerns. When your adolescents see writing as serving a real purpose, they will be more likely to try it.
3. "Students need to take ownership and responsibility" (59).	Student writing should sound like student writing! When teens believe that their writing is their own, they will become more likely to invest themselves in it.
4. "Effective writing programs involve the complete writing process" (60).	Our teens, like all writers, have different ways of approaching writing tasks. Tune in to your adolescents' learning styles and needs as writers. Know that some writing is one draft and some other writing takes time and multiple drafts.
5. "Teachers can help students get started" (60).	Talk with your adolescents about their ideas and encourage them to draw, freewrite, and make lists or webs in order to get started.
6. "Teachers help students draft and revise" (61).	Listen to your teens' drafts and ask real questions about content. Heartfelt questions are the best way to encourage all writers to keep on writing.
7. "Grammar and mechanics are best learned in the context of actual writing" (61).	If you notice errors in conventions in your adolescent's writing, pick just one area at a time to work on (such as punctuation, dialogue, or capitalization). You might also refer to real texts (books, newspapers, letters, magazines) to see how published authors tackle issues of punctuation, spelling, and more.
8. "Students need real audiences and a classroom context of shared learning" (62).	Help your teen find real audiences (family, friends, neighbors) to communicate with.
9. "Writing should extend throughout the curriculum" (63).	You can write just about anything at home: letters to family and friends, songs and plays to perform for the family, scripts for podcasts, blogs . . . The list is endless!
10. "Effective teachers use evaluation constructively and efficiently" (64).	Your job as a parent is to encourage and support the effort your teen makes in writing. Be lavish in praise and specific and limited in your suggestions for improvement.

Source: Left side excerpted from Zemelman, Steve, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde. *Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools*. 2nd ed. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1998. 46–58. Print. Right side developed by Cathy Fleischer and Kim Pavlock, Eastern Michigan Writing Project Family Literacy Initiative.

call for a variety of skills and thought processes. Becoming a successful college writer, we tell them, is certainly about the product their teens will create, but even more importantly, it's about the ways they'll approach the creation of that product—reminding them again of the issues they spoke of in the initial prompt.

Why this focus on the *qualities* of successful college writers, rather than on the nitty-gritty about specific ways to write? We, like many secondary and college teachers, have watched with great interest the current trend to define “college and career ready” students in ways that seem increasingly narrow and limiting. We are inspired by documents such as *Framework for Success in College Writing*, jointly written by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, NCTE, and the National Writing Project, a document that explains why a focus on “habits of mind,” rather than discrete tasks or mastery over particular genres, is so important:

Habits of mind—ways of approaching learning that are both intellectual and practical—are crucial for all college-level learners. Beyond knowing particular facts or completing mandatory readings, students who develop these habits of mind approach learning from an active stance. These habits help students succeed in a variety of fields and disciplines. They are cultivated both inside and outside school. (4)

We have developed the acronym CRAFT (Commitment, Reflection, Awareness, Flexibility, and Thirst for knowledge) to support this way of thinking about writing; as we talk about CRAFT, we provide examples of how those qualities can help writers be successful in all kinds of writing tasks. If teens can approach writing from this stance, we tell the parents, they really are well on their way to becoming college ready.

Once we establish a research base and we explain a bit about what college writing is really like, parents are then ready for what we see as the fun part of the workshop: thinking aloud with them about ways they can help support their teens at home. Writing can be a part of teens' everyday lives, and the more teens see writing and encouragement for writing going on at home, the better writers they will become. Through a series of handouts that give way to discussion, we talk with parents about ways to model and encourage writing: from

letting their teens see them write (from work to pleasure writing, especially letting their teens see those moments when they as adults have struggled and found solutions to writing problems), to *writing to their teens* (notes of congratulations, emails when they're out of town), to *writing with their teens* (family scrapbooks, blogs, or writing walls in the kitchen). And we offer some ideas for specific projects and resources they could encourage at home for both everyday and polished writing: from I-Search papers designed to gather information about family vacations or new purchases to fanfiction sites to letters to the editor. Central to all this is our emphasis on parents talking positively to their teens about writing and finding places and spaces to share writing with others.

We hope the parents we've worked with are able to better recognize discrepancies between what they've learned in our workshops—research-based understandings of ways to teach writing that truly help students become college and career ready—and some other movements that support a more limited definition of and role for writing.

Beyond the Workshops

Responses to these workshops have been universally strong. As students and their parents find each other in the hallway after the session, we hear the buzz as they talk about what they learned and compare what they wrote in their separate sessions. And in follow-up emails, parents tell us over and over how they talk about writing at home quite differently now as a result of their participation. One parent wrote us that he has begun writing a book with his son; another has started informally publishing his son's writing for family and friends.

We believe strongly that connecting with families in this way is vital in the educational context in which we currently find ourselves. Parents need to understand how and why we teach the way we do—not only to help their own kids be more successful writers but also to become more aware the next time legislation is passed that limits opportunities for writing, tests are introduced that only score writing by computer, or a mandatory curriculum is put in place that suggests argumentative writing is all that



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counts. We hope the parents we've worked with are able to better recognize discrepancies between what they've learned in our workshops—research-based understandings of ways to teach writing that truly help students become college and career ready—and some other movements that support a more limited definition of and role for writing. And we hope that they will be ready to raise questions about limited models of writing instruction with decision makers.

And we also hope classroom teachers will take this approach to heart and think about ways they can adapt it in their own contexts. Our colleague Sarah Andrew-Vaughan, a high school teacher and teacher consultant with the Eastern Michigan Writing Project, did just that in the past school year. She created a series of evening sessions for the parents of her ninth-grade students. Convinced by research she had read that the most successful students were those who had parents who were aware of and supportive of what was happening in school, she invited parents to attend three sessions over the course of the semester (supplemented by weekly email notes) to learn and experience what was going on in their teens' classroom. In each session she introduced parents to a particular approach to reading or writing (situated, again, in "parent-friendly research") and then she asked them to try

out the same assignment that their teens had done in class that same day. The first session, for example, started with the same exercise with which we began this article, but with a twist: Sarah asked parents to first write and then talk about both memorable writing and memorable reading moments—an exercise her students had also completed in class that week. As discussion ensued, parents became aware that many of their most memorable reading and writing experiences did not occur in school and wondered aloud if it might be possible to re-create some of those experiences in school settings. This conversation opened the way for Sarah to share with them how their teens had responded to the same prompts and how she was trying to re-create the essence of those moments in her class to help encourage students to become lifelong readers and writers. Sarah also shared some specific strategies the parents could use at home to support their

teens as readers and writers. (See Figure 2 for the parent handout on writing.) Parents were enthusiastic participants and, as Sarah learned over the semester, engaged in substantive discussions with their kids as a result. (One parent, in fact, talked to Sarah's vice principal the day after the first session, telling him that it was one of the best experiences she'd had as a parent at this school.)

Sarah's work with parents is one part of the growing web of relationships for community building that has arisen through this project. Our web expands when we leave our classrooms and our homes to present workshops at area libraries, schools, and other nonprofit organizations where we meet parents, grandparents, teachers, librarians, school administrators, and other interested community members eager to learn more about ways to support student writers. And even though we come from a variety of racial, cultural, religious, educational, and economic backgrounds, we all share a common goal of wanting to encourage and help students develop and grow in their writing. The relationships that we have with parents provide us with opportunities to develop a common language to share information and ideas, so that we can all work in concert in teaching and raising confident, skillful writers. 

FIGURE 2. Easy Ways to Encourage Your Teen's Writing

1. *Model writing in your home:* Demonstrate that writing matters by making writing a visible part of your life. Explain how you use writing (for work, to express an idea, to think through ideas) or talk about a specific piece that you are writing. And answer your teen's questions about your writing: what challenges you, what you like about writing, how it feels to be a writer.
2. *Write with your teen:* Nothing demonstrates to a teen the importance of writing more than making writing a part of your family life. Keep family journals when you go on a trip, with each family member writing an entry. Use Flickr to keep track of family photos and write funny captions together. Keep a family message board in the kitchen and encourage everyone in the family to write notes, poetry, or ideas for activities on the weekend.
3. *Write to your teen:* Model how writing is a great way to communicate by writing to your teen: a note when you're going out of town, a letter praising him for a job well done, a poem celebrating a birthday or special occasion. Teens who see writing modeled more often use writing themselves.
4. *Encourage your teen to write to you.* Writing can be a great way to have your teen thoughtfully explain something in writing: from logically explaining why you should buy him that new video game to why his curfew should be extended by 30 minutes. Writing helps everyone slow down and think—and you'll be surprised by how much clearer his arguments might be!
5. *Help your teen find outlets and audiences for writing.* All writers love to see that their words have an impact on other people, and so help your teen find occasions to write to real audiences. Did she get a new electronic device that doesn't work? Encourage her to write to the manufacturer. Did she read a newspaper article that made her angry? Suggest she write a letter to the editor.
6. *Recognize that writing can find many forms and encourage your teen to try multiple kinds of writing.* Teens can create videos, podcasts, songs, comic books—all genres that involve writing of some kind but can seem more creative and fun than traditional school writing.
7. *Create family traditions that include writing:* Writing can be an important addition to your holiday observances. Ask your high schooler to interview elderly family members or friends about their traditions in celebrating the holidays. The teens can then turn the information from these interviews into a variety of writing: from photos with captions to illustrated stories to poems. These writings could turn into a special and much-valued gift to the family member or friend.
8. *Play teen word games:* Playing with words can be the beginning of good writing. Here's one idea to try with your high school student: together create six-word memoirs that capture a moment in her life. For example, if your teen has just finished her first day of school, she might write, "New universe, old self, what now?" If she's dreading a hard test, she might write, "Killer test awaits. Three more hours." Try some yourself, and have a contest to see who writes the most creative one!

Reprinted from Cathy Fleischer's *Reading and Writing and Teens: A Parent's Guide to Adolescent Literacy*. Urbana: NCTE, 2010.

Notes

1. We use the term *parents* in the rest of this article, but please know we are using it merely as shorthand for grandparent, aunt, uncle, older sibling, or any other interested adult participating in the life of a child or teen.

2. See, for example, the mission statement for the Common Core State Standards.

3. The workshops we're describing here rely on a cadre of trained presenters: we draw ours from teacher consultants from the Writing Project and first-year writing instructors from our university, all of whom received some kind of payment for their participation. We charge for some workshops and offer others for free, depending on the organization. There are other ways teachers can work toward involving parents: creating websites with information about their teaching; sending home "teaching letters" that describe particular units of study and methods of approach; adapting Curriculum Nights to include increased emphasis on how they can help their teens as writers; and many, many more. For more ideas or for information on our workshops, see the website listed in our bio.

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EDITOR'S NOTE:

You'll find additional materials for "Inviting Parents In" at http://www.ncte.org/journals/ej/mar2012_emu_handouts.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Kimberly Coupe Pavlock, one of the authors of the article above, has written up some of the strategies used in the workshops and brought them to ReadWriteThink.org as Tips and How To's; visit http://www.readwritethink.org/search/?resource_type=74.

In "How to Revise and Edit," Pavlock explains how once a piece of writing has been revised and major changes have been made, writers edit to make certain that readers won't be confused or distracted by unintentional errors. Read the tip to learn how to begin editing a piece of writing. <http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/tips-howtos/revise-edit-30116.html>

Helping teens notice the variety of writing all around them in the "real world" motivates them to write in genres that are new and engaging and helps them become more fluent, flexible writers. Learn more in Pavlock's tip "Writing for the Real World." <http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/tips-howtos/writing-real-world-30115.html>

Call for Proposals: 2012 CEL Convention Writing as Leadership: Fostering a Culture of Writing and Reflective Practice

The conference planning committee for the 2012 CEL Convention welcomes proposals that address the conference theme, **Writing as Leadership: Fostering a Culture of Writing and Reflective Practice**. We invite you to share your story or model effective leadership and writing practices in a workshop.

The Conference on English Leadership encourages interactive, participatory presentations. As a non-profit organization of educators, we unfortunately are not able to give a stipend or expenses for this appearance. Please see www.ncte.org/cel for the conference proposal form, which carries a May 1st deadline, and additional information. We look forward to your joining us in Las Vegas, November 18–20, 2012.