



NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT STATEMENT ON
THE 2002 NAEP WRITING REPORT CARD

In July, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) released results from the 2002 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in Writing, the nation's most comprehensive national assessment of student writing skills. Approximately 276,000 students (grades 4, 8, and 12) from 11,000 public and nonpublic schools took part in the exam.

Results from the exam give cause for guarded optimism. Average writing scores for fourth- and eighth-graders increased between 1998 and 2002, while scores for twelfth-graders remained about the same. The percentage of students performing at or above the proficient level increased in all three grade levels and White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander fourth- and eighth-graders all posted higher average scores in 2002 than they did in 1998, the baseline for the current NAEP writing exam. Scores for fourth- and eighth-graders eligible for free/reduced-price lunch also increased, as did scores for fourth- and eighth-grade public school students.

While these results indicate widespread improvement, there remains much to do. Fewer than one in three fourth-graders, one in three eighth-graders, and one in four twelfth-graders scored at or above the proficient level on the 2002 exam. While performance gaps narrowed for some demographic groups, significant differences in scores remain between Black and White students, Hispanic and White students, public school and nonpublic school students, and students eligible for free/reduced-price lunch and those who are ineligible. At all three grade levels, students in urban fringe/large town schools posted higher writing scores than students in both central city and rural schools, and female students posted significantly higher scores than their male counterparts.

In this new century, writing is a skill of increasing importance. Writing is the gateway to success in school, helping students learn to read, to solve problems, and to understand concepts in every part of the curriculum. It is also the currency of the new workplace and global economy where it often has to be produced instantly and effectively.

Results from the NAEP writing exam can serve as a valuable resource for us to learn more about approaches that support improved student writing achievement. In both 1998 and 2002, for example, students who reported that they sometimes or often discussed their writing with their teachers scored higher than those students who reported rarely or never doing so. The same can be said for fourth-graders and eighth-graders whose teachers frequently ask them to plan their writing in advance and write more than one draft. Scores in 2002 for eighth- and twelfth-graders who reported engaging in various stages of the writing process, using a computer to write, and writing long answers to questions that involved reading were significantly higher than scores for those who never or rarely engaged in such practices. Finally, engaging in prewriting activities and writing in a log or journal were also processes that correlated with higher student achievement in 2002.

These teaching and learning strategies complement strategies fostered at sites of the National Writing Project (NWP). Successful teachers of writing (K-16) attend invitational institutes at NWP sites during the summer, where they examine their classroom practices, conduct research, and develop their own writing skills. These institutes advance practices such as those that correlate with higher scores on the NAEP writing exam.

After attending a 2001 writing project summer institute, for example, 70 percent of teachers surveyed by Inverness Research Associates reported an increase in the time they spend talking to students about their writing. Following their summer institute experience, 67 percent of teachers said their students were more likely to answer questions in writing and 64 percent said their students were more likely to write in logs or journals. On a similar survey in 2000, 68 percent of teachers said their students were more likely to plan their writing following the summer institute, and 61 percent said their students were more likely to produce more than one draft.

On one hand, the improvements shown on the 2002 NAEP writing exam, particularly at the fourth- and eighth-grade levels, are encouraging. It is heartening to see scores increasing among Black, White, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander students. Young people must be able to write effectively to succeed academically and professionally and, taken as a whole, the results from the 2002 NAEP writing exam indicate movement in the right direction.

Much work lies ahead, however. In a landmark report released in April, *The Neglected "R": The Need for a Writing Revolution*, the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges called for a dramatic increase in the amount of time and money devoted to student writing as well as investment in technologies that aid in the teaching and assessment of writing. These recommendations seem consistent with the NAEP findings. Time is needed for teachers to talk with students about their writing and for students to do the things we know improve writing performance: plan their writing, write multiple drafts, make use of computers, and write frequently in logs or journals. All this will require an expansion of our priorities for schooling along with attendant changes in the allocation of resources. It will also require the strengthening of partnerships between our schools and organizations like the NWP that can help our teachers learn and use proven effective practices for teaching writing.

Writing is the process by which we learn how to convey our ideas, to use our powers of observation, and to persuade others about our viewpoints. In addition to emphasizing classroom practices shown to improve student writing, we must continue to place value on the practice of writing itself. If writing occurred in every classroom every day, student achievement across content areas would reach new heights for all. A much higher percentage of our young people should be able to write at the proficient level; and all our young people should be able to write at the basic level. To accomplish this, we need a profound commitment to writing in our schools along with support for teachers from organizations like the National Writing Project.

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