Several English teachers in the Poudre School District suggested that I meet Dr. Cindy O’Donnell-Allen, the person they consider most influential in their success as teachers of writing. I wondered what motivates a high school teacher of 11 years to earn graduate degrees and then develop a distinguished career at the university teaching others how to teach children to write well.

Dr. O’Donnell-Allen, a CSU professor of English and director of the CSU Writing Project, replies, “I’m sure I wouldn’t be doing this if it weren’t for an early experience with the ‘Writing Project’.”

The National Writing Project (NWP) is a professional development network at over 200 universities that consists of two major programs: First, a summer institute delivers a two-week intensive course on the teaching of writing for select advanced teachers. Four Saturday workshops during the academic year provide a follow-up. Second, a professional development program brings professionals into the schools, providing hands-on expertise as teachers work on writing with their pupils. PSD students of those teachers who have participated in the CSU Writing Project directly benefit from the special expertise that their teachers have received.

In addition, the CSU Writing Project provides summer creative writing workshops, for which any PSD student is eligible, as well as outreach programs such as CSU’s collaboration with the Museum of Discovery that gives students in Putnam and Irish elementary schools an opportunity to focus on a specific science topic. The idea, according to O’Donnell-Allen, is to “use writing as a tool for learning about science.”

For example, a recent topic involves water use and protection. Students examine the history of flooding of the Poudre and Big Thompson Rivers from the 1800s to the present. Then, with journals in hand, they inspect the rivers from upstream to the plains. University specialists provide a roundtable for the students. By the end of the term, the students have become the specialists and offer their own roundtable.

Another outreach program entails a monthly dinner at the director’s home for novice teachers who are not yet at the level of the summer institute participants, but who appreciate the support and encouragement of more advanced professionals as they negotiate the struggles of beginning teachers.

Finally I asked, “What’s the most important thing for teachers to know about children’s writing?”

“Students have something to say, a story to tell. Our job as teachers is to help them do it in the best way possible.”

I now understood why the teachers I had interviewed earlier wanted me to meet their most influential teacher of writing, who is now, by the way, on the national board of directors of the NWP. Poudre School District is fortunate to have access to the teaching and research of a major university so that our teachers, and ultimately, our children, are the beneficiaries.

At every level of government, business, politics, medicine, law, and academia, communication is key. It’s nice to know that the professionals who teach our children to communicate effectively with the written word have access to a
program like the National Writers Project. Let’s hope that the “powers that be” recognize the value of these programs and continue to invest in our teachers and that means in our children.
