

Popular Writing Program Found to Yield Gains

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The results of a two-year study on the National Writing Project, a teacher professional-development program with nearly 200 sites around the country, show that it [had a positive impact on both teachers' instructional practice and their students' writing](#).

Completed as part of a federal Investing in Innovation validation grant, the experiment looked at the NWP's College-Ready Writers Program, which aims to improve students' ability to write arguments based on what they've read. Forty-four rural districts were randomly assigned to either receive the program's professional development or continue with whatever their district or state would normally provide for support.

The study, conducted by SRI International, found positive, statistically significant effects on the content, structure, and stance (or tone) of students' argument writing.

"This kind of finding that it impacts teacher instruction and student learning is relatively rare in experimental studies," said H. Alix Gallagher, the associate director of the Center for Education Policy at SRI Education and a principal investigator for the study.

The results are good news for the National Writing Project because in two prior SRI studies, the program showed little or no impact on teacher practice and no significant impact on student writing. That's in part because the local sites operated differently in those studies, said Linda Friedrich, the project's director of research and evaluation.

Project in Action

In addition, [Congress cut direct funding for the program](#) five years ago and has not reinstated it. Even so, the program has [continued to receive federal funding, though at a reduced level](#), through the competitive Supporting Effective Educator Development grant program. The 42-year-old National Writing Program supports about 80,000 kindergarten through college-level educators per year. The findings "really confirm our belief and our

many years of observations that professional development really can support teachers in making complex changes in their practice, and that makes a real difference for students," said Friedrich.

In the rural districts randomly assigned to use the College-Ready Writers Program, English/language arts teachers of grades 7-10 received 45 hours of training for two consecutive years on how to teach argument writing.

"The thing the teachers really appreciate is it's embedded," Chip Arnette, a high school principal in Branson, Mo., said of the professional development. His school was in the control group but is now implementing the program.

Participants also received multiday lesson plans, texts, formative-assessment tools, and other curricular resources for their classrooms. The resources came from the national program, but sites could alter and adapt them.

The program focuses on reading nonfiction text and using evidence from the text to make an argument. That's in line with the Common Core State Standards, which emphasize both nonfiction and the use of text-based evidence.

Classroom Outcomes

Teachers in the treatment group reported receiving nearly 10 times as much writing instruction as those in the control group in the second year. There was little difference in how often the two groups asked students to write (about nine out of 10 days for each) or for how long (about 30 minutes a day). But teachers in the writers' group were more likely to focus on argument-writing skills, such as "developing a claim" or "connecting a claim to evidence," the report says.

Students with teachers in the program spent about 40 percent of instructional days on argument writing, while students in the control districts spent 13 percent of days on it. Program students also outperformed their control-group peers on their use of content, structure (or organization), and stance, in their argument writing.