ALLIANCE FOR EXCELLENT EDUCATION
Policy Brief
April 2007

Making Writing Instruction a Priority in America's Middle and High Schools

For as long as there have been secondary schools in America, critics have railed against the inadequate writing skills of America's students.

In recent years, the alarm has been sounded most urgently by the National Commission on Writing, which has argued in a series of reports that this "neglected 'R' " must no longer be overshadowed by reading and 'rithmetic. A generation ago, *Newsweek* magazine, in a 1973 cover story titled "Why Johnny Can't Write," blasted high schools for failing to teach this fundamental skill. And similar criticism rang out in previous generations too, dating back at least as far as the 1870s, when professors at Harvard and other elite colleges complained that incoming students were unable to write coherent essays—and this at a time when only a tiny fraction of students went to college at all, much less to the Ivy League (Connors, 1997).

Obviously, calls to improve student writing are nothing new. But the stakes are far higher today than at any time in the nation's history.

The role that writing now plays in the everyday experience of average Americans is unprecedented. The typical high school graduate of the 1870s, 1970s, or even 1990s couldn't have dreamed of a world as saturated with writing as now exists, both in the workplace and in private life, where email and instant messaging are becoming increasingly common forms of communication.

The majority of American employers now consider writing proficiency to be an essential skill that is becoming ever more critical as the information-based economy continues to expand (National Commission on Writing, 2004). Managerial and professional jobs have always required some amount of writing, but that requirement now extends to technical, clerical, and support positions as well, and to sectors ranging from manufacturing to construction, government, and the service industries. Evidence suggests, however, that few students have the level of writing proficiency that their jobs demand. According to a 2006 survey, 81 percent of employers describe recent high school graduates as "deficient in written communications" such as memos, letters, and technical reports (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006). As a result, private companies are spending an estimated

JOHNNY *STILL* CAN'T WRITE

- Approximately 70–75 percent of students in grades 4–12 are low-achieving writers (Persky et al., 2003).
- College instructors estimate that 50 percent of high school graduates are unprepared for college-level writing (Achieve, Inc., 2005).
- U.S. graduates' literacy skills are lower than those of graduates in most industrialized nations, and comparable only to the skills of graduates in Chile, Poland, Portugal, and Slovenia (OECD, 2000).
- Very few teachers require their students to write more than a few hours per week, and two thirds of students say their weekly writing assignments add up to less than an hour (Applebee & Langer, 2006).
- 81 percent of employers describe recent high school graduates as "deficient in written communications" such as memos, letters, and technical reports (Conference Board, 2006).
- The nation's private companies now spend an estimated $3.1 billion per year—and state governments spend an additional $200 million—teaching their employees to write (National Commission on Writing, 2004; 2005).

$3.1 billion per year—and state governments are investing another $200 million—to provide writing instruction to their employees (National Commission on Writing, 2004; 2005).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, or "the Nation's Report Card") writing exam was last given in 2002; it measured the writing skills of fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders and translated their scores into three levels of proficiency: basic, proficient, and advanced. Across the three grades, only 22–29 percent of students scored at the proficient level, and only 2 percent were found to write at the advanced level (Persky et al., 2003). In other words, 70–75 percent of students were found to be writing below grade level.

Even among students who plan to go to college, proficiency is far from certain. According to research from ACT (2005), roughly a third of all college-bound students fall short of readiness benchmarks for college-level writing composition, making it unlikely that they will earn a grade of C or better in this basic first-year course (a core requirement in most undergraduate programs).

> "Many students are not writing a great deal for any of their academic subjects ... and most are not writing at any length." (Applebee & Langer, 2006)

This translates to extremely high enrollments in remedial writing courses at the college level, particularly at the nation's community colleges, which shoulder a large and growing share of the burden for remediation (Grubb et al., 1999; Perin & Charron, 2006). At least a quarter of new community college students must enroll in a remedial writing class—which in most colleges doesn't count toward a degree—and this figure likely underestimates the number of students who actually need help with writing (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003; Perin, 2006). Further, the costs to individual students comprise just a small part of the overall expense; the bulk falls on the taxpayers, whose bill for community college remediation in writing, reading, and math comes to more than a billion dollars a year. And that doesn't even include the funding that supports the middle and high schools that were supposed to have taught students those skills. In effect, taxpayers are paying twice for basic writing instruction—first in the secondary schools, then again at the college level.

How Much Writing Instruction Goes On in School? Not Much

People often assume that writing is merely the "flip side" of reading, and that if adolescents are proficient readers, they must be proficient writers too. But in fact, while reading and writing are indeed complementary skills, they do not necessarily go hand in hand. Many students learn to read and comprehend difficult academic materials yet struggle to write coherent or compelling texts of their own (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000). Simply put, reading instruction isn't enough. America's students will not become skilled writers unless and until their schools make writing a priority.

Unfortunately, few schools do so.

According to a recent study by the Center for English Learning & Achievement (CELA), the last two decades have seen "some increase in emphasis on writing and the teaching of writing, both in English language arts classrooms and across the curriculum," but "many students are not writing a great deal for any of their academic subjects, including English, and most are not writing at any length" (Applebee & Langer, 2006).

Very few teachers require more than a few hours of writing per week, and two thirds of students say their weekly writing assignments add up to less than an hour. Indeed, "9 percent of high school students are doing almost no writing at all" (Applebee & Langer, 2006).

Of the writing that does occur, much of it is cursory, such as when students compose a sentence or two in response to a textbook question or write a brief summary of material assigned for homework. More extensive writing projects tend to be much less common. For instance, CELA finds that "over 40 percent of the students at Grade 8 and a third at Grade 12 report writing essays requiring analysis or interpretation at most a few times a year."

Why do middle and high school teachers provide so little writing instruction? For one thing, very few teachers—whether in English or other content areas—receive more than a token amount of training in the teaching of writing, whether in their pre-service preparation or in professional development workshops. Further, it can be very time-consuming to read and respond to student writing, and given a teaching load of four or five classes of twenty to thirty or more students each, many teachers are reluctant to require students to write regularly or to produce more than one draft of their essays. (For instance, imagine that a teacher were to assign just two ten-page papers per year, each of them including a rough draft and just one revision. Even with a relatively light teaching load of a hundred students, this would require the teacher to read 4,000 pages of student text, in addition to teaching students about the composing process, guiding them through revisions, and helping them with grammar, style, logic, and organization. And even if the teacher assigns students the responsibility to read and comment on each others' drafts—a common strategy designed to teach critical reading and editing skills while also saving time for the teacher—those students still must be shown how to provide constructive criticism, and they must be supervised in doing so.)

Moreover, many teachers (especially in math, science, and social studies but also in the English department) assume that writing instruction isn't

Writing Next: Eleven Teaching Strategies That Work

In 2006, Carnegie Corporation of New York commissioned a pair of leading scholars—Steve Graham of Vanderbilt University and Delores Perin of Teachers College, Columbia University—to survey the existing research into the effectiveness of various approaches to secondary school writing instruction. The most recent comprehensive review of the research had been conducted twenty years earlier (Hillocks, 1986), and a considerable body of research had accumulated since that time, including many high-quality experimental and quasi-experimental studies. As described in the report, the knowledge base has grown strong enough to recommend a number of specific teaching practices and to suggest new directions for state and federal policymaking.

The resulting report—*Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High School*, published by the Alliance for Excellent Education in 2006—identifies eleven classroom practices that rigorous scientific research has determined to be effective at helping to improve the writing abilities of students in grades 4–12. These include:

Writing Strategies: Teaching students strategies for planning, revising, and editing their compositions.

Summarization: Explicitly and systematically teaching students how to summarize texts.

Collaborative Writing: Instructional arrangements in which adolescents work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions.

Specific Product Goals: Specific, reachable goals for the writing they are to complete.

Word Processing: Using computers and word processors as instructional supports for writing assignments.

Sentence Combining: Teaching students to construct more complex, sophisticated sentences.

Prewriting: Engaging students in activities designed to help them generate or organize ideas for their composition.

Inquiry Activities: Engaging students in analyzing immediate, concrete data to help them develop ideas and content for a particular writing task.

Process Writing Approach: Interweaving a number of writing instructional activities in a workshop environment that stresses extended writing opportunities, writing for authentic audiences, personalized instruction, and cycles of writing.

Study of Models: Providing students with opportunities to read, analyze, and emulate models of good writing.

Writing for Content Learning: Using writing as a tool for learning content material.

available on the Web at:
www.all4ed.org/publications/WritingNext/index.html

their responsibility. Typically, secondary-level teachers understand their role to be teaching the *content* of the academic disciplines, which they distinguish from the teaching of *skills*, such as reading and writing. Similarly, state standards documents are more or less silent on the teaching of writing in every content area other than English language arts. And while open-ended writing activities are now included in nearly every state's accountability system, state achievement tests place far greater emphasis on multiple-choice and short-answer items than on independent writing. To the extent that writing is included, students tend to be rewarded for writing quick, superficial essays. Thus, some experts worry that existing state tests create incentives for teachers to drill students in simple, formulaic kinds of writing, at the expense of time they might otherwise spend teaching them to write clearly and for a variety of purposes that they will need as they move through college, the workplace, and life (Hillocks, 2003; Applebee & Langer, 2006).

Students Need More Engaging Opportunties to Write

Experts often refer to two main goals for writing in school: *writing to learn* and *learning to write.*

For decades, education reformers have recognized that writing can be an effective means by which to learn about a given topic, whatever the academic content area (Shanahan, 2004; Sperling & Freedman, 2001). Writing assignments require students to wrestle with ideas, identify points of confusion, clarify their thoughts, and defend their arguments, and they provide teachers with a useful way to assess students' growing knowledge and understanding of the issues. Thus, experts often recommend that teachers in English, the social sciences, the hard sciences, mathematics, and other disciplines assign frequent writing projects of various kinds, from short, ungraded pieces to longer, more formal essays.

At the same time, reformers have stressed that writing is an enormously complex activity and that students need a lot of practice in order to master the many skills and subskills required to become competent writers. For instance, students must become proficient in spelling, grammar, and punctuation; they must learn to write in various styles and formats, depending on the particular situation and audience; they must build strong vocabularies and deep reservoirs of background knowledge; they must learn to cope with writer's block and develop the stamina needed to get through long and difficult assignments; and they must learn strategies (such as preparing an outline of the piece to be written, soliciting feedback, and writing and revising multiple drafts) that help them to organize their writing projects and complete them successfully.

In short, writers have a lot to learn. Some people may have more raw talent than others, but all writers need a lot of practice, over a period of many years, under the guidance of well-trained teachers. As things stand, though, few students get anything close to the amount of instruction and practice they need to become competent writers. Further, a rigidly formulaic approach to teaching writing has been the norm in America's schools for well over a century (Connors, 1997). To the extent that teachers do assign essays, they tend to insist that students use a specific organizational structure (most often the well-known "five paragraph essay") and write in a constrained, impersonal style (often referred to as "academic," even though, in truth, no such universal style exists among the various academic disciplines). Further, when responding to student writing, teachers tend to devote the bulk of their attention to formal features (mostly grammar, spelling, and punctuation), and their responses are often punitive, limited to the pointing out of errors.

Advocates of the five-paragraph essay argue that such formulas can provide useful guidance for beginning writers, offering them a crutch upon which to rely until they are ready to try other styles and formats. However, there exists no evidence to support this theory, and most experts in writing instruction now argue that this approach does more harm than good, giving students the false impression that good writing involves nothing more than following a set of rules. Rather, the expert consensus holds that the best writing instruction teaches students to become comfortable with a wide variety of styles and formats, so they can

communicate effectively with many different kinds of readers in many different contexts, adapting their writing to the particular situation and audience at hand.

Moreover, experts caution that the more formulaic and constrained the assignments, the more students learn to think of writing as a rote, unengaging activity. Far better—and far more consistent with the research findings on motivation and engagement in school (e.g., Pajares, 2003)—are assignments that encourage students to invest their writing with a compelling purpose, beyond merely pleasing the teacher or getting an acceptable score on a state test. Rather than insisting that students always conform to a prescribed style and format, or that they limit themselves to a narrow set of topics, the idea is to require them to make active choices in their writing, with the teacher providing guidance and suggesting ways to improve their drafts. For example, students might choose the topic they wish to write about, the intellectual position they wish to argue, the purpose they have for writing, the style and format they take to be most appropriate, the language they find most compelling, and so on, with the teacher playing the roles of editor, critic, and audience.

Students should be given many opportunities to write, and they should be taught not just a single kind of writing but writing for many audiences, for many reasons, and from many points of view.

Recommendations for Federal Policymakers

As long as millions of American adolescents struggle to write, they have little hope of competing in a global economy or becoming the truly engaged citizens the nation needs in order to thrive. The federal government has a major role to play in middle and high schools—just as it does in early grades—to help improve writing instruction. The resources directed over the years toward teaching early literacy skills have shown results; a similar investment in older students is now needed to sustain that earlier commitment and provide the continuum of supports that can raise achievement levels. Based upon research and best practices, the Alliance for Excellent Education strongly recommends that federal policymakers:

Invest in a comprehensive federal adolescent literacy program.

The federal Striving Readers grant program must be included in the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act. In order to capitalize fully upon the benefits of Reading First, Striving Readers should become a $1 billion formula grant program to states to support professional development and targeted interventions to improve all aspects of adolescent literacy, including writing and oral communication.

Give schools the flexibility and resources they need to schedule more time for writing instruction.

To prepare for college and the modern workplace, middle and high school students will need to write extensively, immersing themselves in various kinds of texts and learning how to communicate to many different audiences, for many different purposes. Because writing instruction can be time intensive, teachers are unlikely to assign more independent writing, such as drafts and revision of student work, without significant adjustments in their class sizes, teaching loads, and schedules. The federal government should encourage states to leverage Title I and Title II funds in the No Child Left Behind Act to use time for writing instruction and train teachers in effective approaches to writing instruction.

Encourage states to incorporate writing skills into content-area standards.

Federal policymakers should create incentives for state standards to address the writing skills that are specific to each discipline. So long as writing is relegated to its own standards document—or solely to the standards document for English—content-area teachers will have tacit permission to ignore it.

Increase federal support for the National Writing Project.

The National Writing Project is a proven, effective professional development network that has helped thousands of middle and high school teachers incorporate writing into the curriculum, primarily in English classes but also in the other content areas. Increased funding would permit the NWP to seek greater participation from math, science, and social studies teachers.

Increase federal funding for enhanced assessments to help states include more student writing in No Child Left Behind accountability systems.

While open-ended writing tests can be more expensive than those that rely on multiple-choice and short-answer questions, they create a greater incentive for teachers to offer more and better literacy instruction. A federal program to support enhanced assessments exists, but it has been poorly funded and is used almost exclusively to develop tests for students with disabilities and English language learners. Support to develop those tests should continue, but funding should increase to cover additional needs such as open-ended questions and prompts that encourage students to write in a range of styles and formats.

What Is the National Writing Project?

The National Writing Project (NWP), created in 1974 in Berkeley, California, began as a single, university-based, peer-to-peer professional development program for local teachers. Over three decades it has grown into a network of nearly 200 sites across the country, offering workshops and summer institutes on writing instruction to roughly 140,000 fourth- through twelfth-grade teachers every year, including teachers from all academic content areas.

Since 1991, the NWP has received support from Congress through Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (known as No Child Left Behind). As of 2007, federal funding stands at $21.5 million per year, and the NWP continues to enjoy strong support from House and Senate leaders on both sides of the aisle.

Support more teacher professional development in adolescent literacy.

The Higher Education Act reauthorization bill should include literacy partnerships (similar to the existing Math and Science Partnerships program), designed to support research into and the development of innovative teaching strategies. In addition, as part of the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act, Title II funding should be targeted to ensure more teachers learn to incorporate writing strategies into their teaching.

Conclusion

Given how important a role writing now plays in college, work, and everyday life, students cannot afford to leave high school without strong writing skills. In past decades, Johnny and Jane may not have been able to write, but at least they stood a reasonable chance of finding a satisfying, well-paying job in any number of industries that were willing to reward them for manual skills, hard work, and a strong back. Today, those jobs are fast disappearing, and education—including sophisticated literacy skills—is quickly becoming the coin of the realm.

Educators and policymakers have spent more than a century complaining that adolescents can’t write. Now it’s time to put the complaints aside and make a real commitment to improving writing instruction in the secondary schools.

References

Achieve, Inc. (2005). *Rising to the challenge: Are high school graduates prepared for college and work?* Washington, DC: Author.

ACT. (2005). *Crisis at the core: Preparing all students for college and work*. Iowa City: Author.

Applebee, A., & Langer, J. (2006). *The state of writing instruction in America's schools: What existing data tell us.* Albany, NY: Center on English Learning and Achievement.

Casner-Lotto, J., & Barrington, L. (2006). *Are they really ready to work?* New York: The Conference Board.

Connors, R. (1997). *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, theory, and pedagogy*. University of Pittsburgh Press.

Fitzgerald, J., & Shanahan, T. (2000). Reading and writing relations and their development. *Educational Psychologist, 35,* 39–50.

Graham, S., & Perin, D. (2007). *Writing next: Effective strategies to improve writing of adolescents in middle and high schools. A report to Carnegie Corporation of New York*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.

Grubb, W. N., Worthen, H., Byrd, B., Webb, E., Badway, N., Case, C., et al. (1999). *Honored but invisible: An inside look at teaching in community colleges*. New York: Routledge.

Hillocks, G. (1986). *Research on written composition: New directions for teaching*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

——. (2003). *The testing trap: How state writing assessments control learning*. New York: Teachers College Press.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2003). *Remedial education at degree-granting postsecondary institutions in fall 2000: Statistical analysis report.* (Technical Report, NCES 2004-0101.) Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Science.

National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges. (2004). *Writing: A ticket to work ... Or a ticket out: A survey of business leaders.* New York: The College Board.

——. (2005). *Writing: A powerful message from state government*. New York: The College Board.

OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development). (2000). *Literacy in the information age: Final report of the international adult literacy survey.* Paris, France: Author.

Pajares, F. (2003). Self-efficacy beliefs, motivation, and achievement in writing: A review of the literature. *Reading & Writing Quarterly, 19,* 139–158.

Perin, D. (2006). Can community colleges protect both access and standards? The problem of remediation. *Teachers College Record, 108,* 339–373.

Perin, D., & Charron, K. (2006). "Lights just click on every day": Academic preparedness and remediation in community colleges. In T. R. Bailey & V. S. Morest (Eds.), *Defending the community college equity agenda*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press.

Persky, H. R., Daane, M. C., & Jin, Y. (2003). *The nation's report card: Writing 2002*. (NCES 2003–529.) U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences. National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

Shanahan, T. (2004). Overcoming the dominance of communication: Writing to think and to learn. In T. L. Jetton & J. A. Dole (Eds.), *Adolescent literacy research and practice*. New York: Guilford.

Sperling, M., & Freedman, S. W. (2001). Review of writing research. In V. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (4th ed.). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.