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Sing the Write Song: Collaborating to Bring Systemic Change in Writing

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"Wait! You didn't start with 'The Writing Song'!" shouts Kendall from the back of the classroom.

"You're right! Who's going to lead the song today?" asks fourth grade teacher Connie Dye.

"I get to! It's my birthday!" shouts Takumi, who bounds to the front of the class. In his booming voice, he starts the chant...

*"I don't know what you've been told... (His classmates echo his words.)
"Novi writers are good as gold."
(Echo)*

"We quick plan, draft and write, write, write." (Echo)

"Our green dot stories are out of sight!" (Echo)

"Count off...1, 2

"Count off...3, 4

*"Count off...1, 2, 3, 4...Let's
WRITE!" (Pumping fists!)*

So starts another Writer's Workshop in Connie Dye's fourth grade class at Parkview Elementary School in Novi, Michigan (which is located northwest of Detroit). These kids demand that they be granted their song, and more importantly, their daily Writing Workshop time!

How can a school system take the energy and passion for writing found in classrooms like Mrs. Dye's and spread it to all of the young writers

throughout the district? That was the challenge. In the fall of 2006, Superintendent Peter Dion charged Novi teachers with the task of raising students' writing scores as measured by the state's assessment, Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP).

Most districts in Michigan, including Novi, depend on the MEAP to measure achievement in writing. Novi's MEAP writing scores indicated that students were relatively "weak writers" when compared to the district's math and reading scores. The district's third- and fourth-grade reading and mathematics scores were consistently in the ninety percent proficient range, while the writing scores were approximately sixty percent proficient. Novi not only needed to increase the number of "proficient writers," but it also wanted to increase the number of passionate, joyful writers. So, what began as a writing program in a single elementary school blossomed into a district-wide initiative for Novi Community School District. This is the story of that journey.

The Journey Begins

Novi teachers needed a system of teaching writing that would be effective. They needed to be certain of students' learning paths, and the district needed to provide adequate teacher training and support in the area of writing instruction. In order to make this systemic change, some essential elements had to be put in place. First of all, Novi administration had to provide resources and time for writing instruction. Novi was not alone in this quest. In fact, our entire nation was struggling to produce strong writers. In 2004 the National Commission on Writing recommended *"that the nation's leaders place writing squarely in the center of the school agenda and that policymakers at the state and local levels provide the resources required to improve writing."* Furthermore, the Commission was troubled by findings that most students spend little time writing, and they recommended that schools double the amount of time allocated for writing. Additionally, all teachers should have common expectations for strong writing and

writing should be considered every teacher's responsibility. The driving force for shaping the writing initiative in Novi was from the National Commission on Writing: "Teachers deserve support as they develop students' writing."

After researching *best practices* in the field of writing instruction, Novi's district literacy leaders determined that the writing process would be taught using the writing workshop model in all kindergarten through sixth grade classrooms. The endeavors of the National Writing Project, National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), Donald Graves, Ralph Fletcher, Katie Wood Ray and Lucy Calkins were the inspiration for the district's direction. NCTE states, "Students should become comfortable with pre-writing techniques, multiple strategies for developing and organizing a message, a variety of strategies for revising and editing, and strategies for preparing products for public audiences and for deadlines" ("Beliefs"). Time, choice and ownership are the foundational pieces of the workshop: mini-lessons, sustained writing time and sharing

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make up the effective components of daily writing. Calkins writes, "It is important that children of every age receive frequent opportunities to rehearse, draft, revise and edit their writing."

Improving students' writing achievement and meeting Michigan Standards and Benchmarks meant that Novi needed to change how writing looks and feels for both students and teachers. *Change* means some teachers need the emotional safety net of working with a mentor, while others need instruction in how to teach writing more effectively. Benchmarks, such as applying writing strategies, effectively using drafting process, revising own draft effectively, proofreading and editing one's own writing, as well as reading fluently and listening attentively, were all built into the writers' workshop model. Building this community of writers meant believing "everyone has

the capacity to write, writing can be taught, and teachers can help students become better writers" (NCTE Beliefs). This had become Novi's mantra.

A Building Changes

At Parkview Elementary, one of Novi's five kindergarten-through-fourth-grade schools, Principal Jenifer Michos began to lay the groundwork for a building change. She assigned Literacy Specialist Mary Cooper to provide job-embedded professional development for Parkview teachers in writing instruction. Cooper was previously trained by the National Writing Project and possessed a strong passion for writing and for providing teachers professional development in this area. Michos, an advocate of teacher leadership, stood on the belief that Cooper's leadership and job-embedded professional development would improve writing at Parkview. Michos proposed to Superintendent Dion that this initiative should be spread district-wide in the future.

Cooper would work with each one of Parkview's twenty-two kindergarten through fourth grade teachers to establish common student learning paths, teacher practices, and expectations. Cooper's first goal was to create a risk-free, open, sharing relationship with each teacher. To increase mutual sharing and investment in the teaching of writing, Cooper used student work as an avenue to dialogue with teachers about the work, because she says, "This is a non-threatening way to have substantive conversations with teachers." Furthermore, she states, "It takes the focus off of the teacher and places it on student work." Student writing samples were used to ascertain baseline data and targeted needs.

Prior to going into classrooms, Cooper met with teachers during their planning time to establish goals for their shared work. At the beginning of the 2006-2007 school year, Cooper spent a week in each teacher's classroom, and while Cooper modeled the lesson, students and teachers wrote. The modeling gave classroom teachers the unique opportunity to be reflective practitioners. Some of the teachers gathered new strategies to implement, while others used it as a refresher course. The modeled lessons were designed to create a school-wide common vocabulary, to unify strategies, and to solidify instructional practices.

Cooper and the classroom teachers successfully integrated the essential elements of the writing workshop, consisting of the following components:

- engaging in an opening song
- setting learning targets
- providing a mini-lesson
- engaging in sustained writing
- sharing
- reflecting on learning

As Cooper explains, “The song plays a vital role in creating habits of thoughts for our young writers; it also generates enthusiasm at the onset of the writing time. For some of the writers, the song is the only easy part of the Writing Workshop.” Knowing what “best practice” says about the value of music, “Music is a powerful carrier of signals that activate emotion and long term memory,” state Webb & Webb, and the Novi teachers were quick to incorporate this element into their workshop routine. Additionally, to increase student achievement and personal investment, teachers used Richard Stiggins’ model of setting clear learning targets at the onset of each lesson (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis and Chappuis). At the end of the daily writing workshop, students wrote reflective learning statements in their writer’s notebooks. While conducting formative assessment, Connie Dye discovered one student wrote, “As a writer I learned there are many types of nonfiction writing I can try. I liked point of view. It was easy.” Another student wrote, “I learned that my writer’s notebook isn’t just a place to put my ideas, it’s also a friend.” This data allowed Dye to confirm that she had hit her teaching target and plan for future mini-lessons.

The remainder of the 2006-07 school year was dedicated to Cooper and the teachers continuing the job-embedded professional development in their classrooms. Additionally, they met weekly during teacher planning time. Following Charlotte Danielson’s “Plan, Teach, Reflect, Apply” model, they processed their work and planned for future lessons. By June of 2007, Parkview teachers had all received training. They concluded the year feeling more confident as teachers of writing. Second grade teacher, Carolyn Chaney stated, “It was empowering to have Mary [Cooper] model the lessons in my classroom

and be accessible for support.” The groundwork was laid for establishing a school-wide, common student-learning path for writing. In addition, students’ own self-assessments showed that the overwhelming majority felt positively about writing. They began to view themselves as writers!

Change Expands

Success in the 2006-07 school year at only one school was not enough to bring district-wide change. The district needed to commit to continuing this training for *all* teachers of writing in *all* schools. Teachers needed to be clear about their students’ learning paths (i.e., addressing individual needs to reach an independent writing stage). Mary Cooper traced the progress of her work with teachers at Parkview monitoring individual progress quarterly by using student-writing samples scored along Bonnie Hills’ Writing Continuums. Central Office Administrator Superintendent Dion and Assistant Superintendent Beels concluded there was sufficient data to show that this initiative would likely be effective on a district-wide level. Beginning in 2007-08, Cooper’s responsibility was expanded from one building to all K-6 buildings. As K-6 Writing Specialist, Cooper’s primary charge would be to raise student-writing achievement, and *Write Start* was created.

Cooper recognized that the heart and passion of the program would come from the thirty dedicated third through fifth grade classroom teachers who volunteered to work with her during that school year. Five teachers from each of the six elementary schools joined Cooper for the initial launching of *Write Start*. The *Write Start* teachers’ goals included:

- to increase competence and confidence as teachers of writing
- to raise teachers’ confidence as writers
- to share ideas and knowledge learned with colleagues

Sustained, high-quality professional development would be essential in order to achieve these goals. Participants and Cooper shared their energy and knowledge of writing as they partnered in the classroom, spending one hour every day for two weeks together. For example, Cooper typically modeled lessons in a classroom while the teacher observed

and participated as a writer. This gave teachers the unique opportunity to learn as both teacher and student—a strategy Parkview teachers found effective the preceding year. Together, Cooper and the classroom teacher planned lessons based on student and teacher needs. Additionally, they analyzed student work to further inform and drive instruction.

Training for *Write Start* was intensified with four professional development days. The training provided teachers with a greater repertoire of teaching techniques, and participants read professional articles by leaders in the field and devoted time to developing their own pieces of writing. A secondary benefit of this time spent together was the creation of a professional learning community (PLC). Teachers needed to know that this was a safe place to express their ideas, celebrate successes, discuss shortfalls, and receive support from their peers; and the teachers' feedback reflected these qualities. For example, Melissa Israel, a third grade teacher-participant says, "It was great to be a part of this group, because I was able to share my successes and frustrations; I knew I was not alone."

Not only did Israel and her *Write Start* colleagues have the support and encouragement of their peers, but they

also received the support of their community. Cooper held three parent training sessions on how to help young authors at home. Two hundred-fifty parents attended the presentations, and those who were unable to attend could view it at home via local access television and Web connections.

Feedback

Did *Write Start* provide adequate teacher training and support in the area of writing instruction? At the onset and conclusion of the 2007-08 school year, the thirty teacher participants were surveyed. Twenty-four percent of the teachers indicated they felt *confident* in teaching writing at the beginning of the year; however, by the end of the year 100% of the teacher-participants felt confident in teaching writing! Likewise, at the onset of the school year, thirty-three percent of the group felt *competent* as writing teachers; by the conclusion of the program's first year ninety-five percent felt competent. Teachers now believed that they had the skills to teach students using the writing workshop model. There was an overwhelming change in attitude. Writing had gone from drudgery to a subject teachers—and students—enjoyed.

The participants noted a significant change in their willingness to share ideas with their colleagues: thirty-eight percent in September 2007 versus ninety-five percent in June 2008 (See Figures 1-2).

This Novi Community School District initiative created a professional learning community that positively impacted teachers and their classroom practices because the teachers were learning from and sharing with one another—with the support of administration and the community. Douglas Reeves' research concurs as to the importance of peer support: "Teachers and leaders are influenced by their own colleagues" (4). Marianne Malarkey, fifth grade teacher and participant says, "*Write Start* is the best professional development I've ever had! Being able to work and collaborate with people helps to enrich my passion and

Figure 1

Figure 2

energy. It brought back my enthusiasm to teach writing and that carried over to my young authors.”

Novi Community Schools caught writing fever! Because of the enthusiasm generated by the first participants’ success, interest and talk, other teachers wanted to become a part of *Write Start*. This compelled the district administrators to offer thirty additional teachers the opportunity to be *Write Start* participants in the 2008-09 school year. Novi plans to extend the program into 2011, at which time all K-6 teachers will have completed *Write Start* training.

As students began moving up the grades, they have consistently expected and have requested daily writing time. “In all my years of teaching, I’ve never had students *ask* to write until now,” said amazed fifth grade teacher, Anita Lazar. Students had become the catalyst for change in the district. In anticipation of meeting the students’ needs as they progress through the grades, Literacy Lab for grades 7-12, modeled after *Write Start*, was created in the 2008-09 school year.

Teachers throughout the district are encouraged to write daily using practices such as: keeping a writer’s notebook, modeled writing, teachers sharing their writing, emulating mentor texts to teach craft, conferring with students, setting writing goals, sharing daily, publishing student work, and celebrating writing. At home practice is supported by resources, tools and tips available on the district website.

Systemic Change

Novi Community Schools believe that the burgeoning passion and energy, which symbolically began with students singing the “Write Song,” could be passed along throughout the district to ultimately enhance student achievement in writing. Novi was able to provide effective training and sustained support for teachers. Through this process, *Write Start* teachers became familiar with their students’ learning paths. Modeling in the classroom allowed teachers to become reflective practitioners. Teachers’ confidence and competence grew, and they felt comfortable sharing their

knowledge and experiences with colleagues.

Beginning with administrative support and teachers’ desire to enhance students’ learning, Novi community has truly displayed an interest and investment in the importance of writing. After parent training sessions were conducted, parents grew more interested and confident in helping their young authors. This parent interest was revealed in several ways, including asking classroom teachers to see their children’s writing and seeking ways to be helpful in promoting particular practices of writing at home.

One parent was so inspired to be a role model for his children that he’s been writing a letter to his extended family each week in order to show the value of writing. In May of 2007, Novi’s Board of Education President, Jeff Nielson, publicly stated, “My third grade daughter and her friends talk about writing ‘thoughtshots’ and ‘snapshots’ while they are riding bikes and playing in the neighborhood!” These allusions to Barry Lane’s terminology for writing more descriptively have clearly passed from theory to classroom practices to students’ daily language.

The most overt indication of the power of writing was demonstrated to the community through the acts of kindness by 1,700 of Novi’s young authors—kindergartners through sixth graders. These students wrote, illustrated and published pieces of their writing, and then donated them to the newly opened children’s ward at Providence Park Hospital, as well as to seven other pediatric wards throughout Metro Detroit. Students learned first-hand that their writing makes the world a better place.

What began with one building, and a handful of teachers and their passionate mentor, grew to embrace an entire community. But the challenge remained: Were students’ MEAP scores improved? Yes, they were! In Fall 2006, 67% of the district’s third graders were proficient at writing. This increased to 78.9% in Fall 2007, and by Fall 2008, 86.2% of third graders in the district were considered proficient. Likewise, fourth graders started out at 68.9% proficient in 2006, and increased to 70.2% in 2007. Fifth graders went

“My third grade daughter and her friends talk about writing ‘thoughtshots’ and ‘snapshots’ while they are riding bikes and playing in the neighborhood!”

from 77.4% proficient in 2007 to 80.5% in 2008. Novi succeeded in creating passionate, joyful writers who were able to demonstrate their learned skills on the MEAP.

What are Novi's hopes for the future? That all students actively engage in classrooms filled with other writers and guided by enthusiastic, confident teachers of writing, whose instruction will take writers to a new level of competence and achievement. This commitment and level of competence and achievement will ultimately lead to life-long writers who will use their abilities to enhance our world. Novi has only sung one verse of their "Write Song." It fully expects the entire learning community to be singing along with their young authors, adding more verses to the melodies of written expression as they write, right on!

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Connie Dye (cdye@novi.k12.mi.us) has begun her twelfth year of teaching at Parkview Elementary School. She is currently a fourth grade teacher. She strives daily to challenge students to grow, learn, and work hard while having fun.

Marianne Malarkey (mmalarkey@novi.k12.mi.us) has taught 5th grade at Novi Meadows for 23 years. She has a Master's Degree in Elementary Language arts from Eastern Michigan University.

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