Critical Accreditation Visit this February

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less apt to develop a writer’s thinking skills.”
And it is spreading downward. In preparation for the fourth-grade state writing test, she said, she sees third-grade teachers pressed to use the five-paragraph formula. A teacher in Dr. Patterson’s class described her frustration over a practice essay test in her district asking third graders to "defend or refute from a patriotic standpoint" whether a friend should go to a Memorial Day parade. "For nine-year-olds?" said Dr. Patterson. "Defend or refute?"

Dr. Patterson has her teachers write in every class – something she did with her students during 29 years in the public schools. They draw maps of their neighborhoods, then write a story of something that happened there. They envision a character they’d like to create, make a paper doll of it, then pair up with another student and together write a story with the two characters interacting.

"You’re teaching them narrative – how to tell stories that are clear to them," she said. She has them read good essays that start a hundred different ways – with a quote; a question; a simple declaration of a problem; a run-on sentence; a word or two. There are lessons on how a writer blows up an important moment and how to turn a personal piece of writing into a researched essay.

Recently, Kristen Covelle, 24, has been going on interviews for English teaching jobs. She mentions exciting things she’s learned from Dr. Patterson. "The interview will be going great," Ms. Covelle said, "and then MEAP will come up. They want to know will I teach to the test, that’s what they’re looking for. They asked how I feel about using 'I' in writing. Would there ever be a case when 'I' is appropriate in an essay. I knew the answer they want – you’re not supposed to use it. But I couldn’t say that. I said there could be times, you just can’t close the door. They didn’t say anything but it was definitely the low point of the interview."

Ms. Karnes isn’t totally against the formula. "For kids struggling, if you can give them a formula and they fill in the blanks, some will pass the MEAP test who wouldn’t otherwise," she said. "But it turns into a prison. It stops you from finding a kid’s potential."

She loves the last month of school, when state tests are over, she said. Last spring she did lessons on poetry and writing short stories. "I found interests and talents in those kids I didn’t know were there," she said. "It would have been nice to have a whole year to build on those things."