

BOARD OF EDUCATION

Attachment: Information 10

PALO ALTO UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

Date: 03.22.05

TO: Mary Frances Callan, Superintendent

FROM: Cynthia L. Pino, Associate Superintendent – Educational Services

PREPARED BY: Nancy Ayling, Writing Consultant

SUBJECT: Writing Update

We must apply what we know from research and promising practices to foster powerful literacy experiences for our students. The journey to lifelong learning begins with a shared vision of success and a common vocabulary for how we talk about these critical issues.

--Betsy Dyches

South Carolina Writing Improvement Coordinating Council

PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to review the history of the Palo Alto Unified School District writing initiative and to inform the Board of Education about the program's current status and future direction.

BACKGROUND

Believing that writing well is an essential, lifelong skill and a means of satisfying personal expression and effective social communication, District staff has put in place a districtwide program to foster exemplary writing. The program has its roots in the 1995 District initiative, *Pathways to Literacy*, and the more recent work on writing began in the spring of 2000.

LEADING THE WAY - K-5

Starting in 2000, elementary literacy leaders laid the groundwork for a comprehensive writing program that addresses District and state standards and promotes best writing practices. In two years of intense work, they created a framework that secondary educators can follow to continue the work of developing effective writers.

That framework includes:

- a writing matrix
- a comprehensive student assessment system
- in-depth professional development on best writing practices
- multiple resources - including writing resource binders, carefully selected instructional materials, and on-site coaching
- a network among schools that fosters the sharing of successful practices and maintains the focus on District and individual site goals for writing

A significant factor in the success of turning vision into reality, i.e., implementing the writing framework in twelve elementary schools, was the leadership infrastructure consisting of a writing task force, writing training team, and school leadership teams. Coordinating these efforts were two

District Literacy Resource Teachers and two Literacy Lead Teachers from each elementary site. Their work led to a systematically implemented writing program at all PAUSD elementary schools.

BUILDING ON K-5 SUCCESS – SECONDARY’S “FIRST STEPS”

At the October 15, 2001, staff development day, secondary teachers of English/ language arts, science, social sciences, and applied academics were introduced to the 6 traits + 1 analytical model for assessment and instruction. This created a link with instructional practices and writing vocabulary already used in K-5 classrooms. Teachers also worked in their subject areas to devise curricular plans that incorporated 6 trait strategies and were aligned to District and state standards.

In spring 2002, sixteen middle school teachers from three subject areas attended a 3-day workshop on the 6 traits + 1 model presented by Vicki Spandel. This group met again in late spring and the following fall to discuss ways to embed 6 traits into existing curriculum and disseminate those practices to others in their departments. Two additional training sessions were offered to interested middle school teachers: an introduction to 6 traits and a more advanced session on using 6 traits strategies to teach persuasive writing.

MAINTAINING THE MOMENTUM – 2003 TO THE PRESENT

Elementary

Elementary teachers continue to refine and strengthen the teaching of writing. Because assessment is an essential component of an exemplary writing program, in the fall of 2003, the Writing Training Team and the Science Resource Teacher distributed writing assessment binders, containing prompts, rubrics, and student papers, to all elementary teachers. The team also provided training in the use of prompts and rubrics.

The continued focus on writing has created a bridge necessary for a total reading-writing connection that allows students to transfer skills and deeper understanding to other areas of the curriculum. Literacy Resource Teachers have collaborated with the Science Resource Teacher to integrate writing strategies with the content of other subject areas and provide teachers with resource books and materials that support that integration. In English/language arts, the reading-writing connection has been strengthened by children’s literature that supports writing instruction and by core literature units that emphasize differentiated instruction and writing.

In addition to regular classroom programs, the District Academy offers literacy classes to meet the needs of struggling readers and writers. These students also may attend District’s Literacy Summer School, now in its seventh year of operation. Both programs help the District to meet its goals for academic excellence for all students.

Secondary

The main writing focus at the secondary level has been the extension of the District Writing Matrix from K-5 to Grades 6-8. At the October 19, 2004, staff development day, middle school English/language arts teachers reviewed the draft document, provided feedback, and used the matrix to develop lesson plans for different genres of writing. These plans address District writing standards and target important writing skills and strategies. As teachers use the matrix to guide writing instruction, they will establish consistent expectations, instructional practices, and assessment among the three middle schools.

With an eye to its future use at the high schools and across disciplines, the English/language arts departments at Palo Alto and Gunn high schools reviewed the writing matrix and provided feedback at the November 2004 steering committee meeting.

Teacher Survey on Writing Instruction

To provide information about current writing, elementary and middle school English/ language arts teachers completed a survey about the types of writing and instructional practices included on the District writing matrix. (See Attachment.) An initial review of the surveys reveals widespread use of best practices and alignment with District and state standards at elementary and middle schools. From kindergarten to eighth grade, teachers expect students to use the writing process on major assignments. They ask students to write for a variety of purposes on a daily basis and in a variety of genres - exposition, narration, and poetry. Across the District, teachers are using 6 traits + 1 vocabulary, instructional practices, and rubrics for assessing writing. It appears that the work ahead will be more about refining practices and ensuring consistency than creating programs or correcting major problems that impede student success.

MEASURING SUCCESS

District staff has an increased capacity to track and interpret assessment data, student by student, at both site and District levels. This allows teachers and administrators to use student assessment results to determine instructional needs and plan instruction. Teachers use both formative and summative assessment to foster and measure student progress. Multiple measures provide an accurate picture of what students know and are able to do. They include in class writing activities, formal writing assignments, writing folders, and portfolios as well as an outside measure like the ERB/WrAP (Educational Resource Bureau Writing Assessment Program) which shows how students in Grades 4-8 and 10 perform when asked to write on a designated prompt in a limited time and without teacher guidance. On this type of assessment, Palo Alto students have shown steady growth in the writing traits measured—overall development, organization, support, sentence structure, word choice, and conventions—as reported in the State of the District Report each year.

FACING CHALLENGES

On the recent survey about writing instruction, elementary and middle school teachers were asked to indicate the two greatest challenges they faced in teaching writing. Across the grade levels, the same challenges appeared.

Time was the greatest challenge, time to provide in-depth writing instruction when there are so many competing demands. For elementary teachers, it was the demands of other curricular areas; for middle school, it was the challenge of fitting in literature, vocabulary, grammar and usage, and listening and speaking within the number of instructional minutes allocated. Time also was the challenge in providing meaningful, instructive feedback about student writing. Where can time be found to confer with an individual student or provide extra help for the struggling writer? Where is the time to read, assess, and comment on one hundred twenty essays, each of which takes fifteen to twenty minutes? Teachers are frustrated by their inability to meet the challenge time places on them in a way that is congruent with their high standards of performance.

The second challenge teachers identified was the wide range of students' prior experiences, abilities, and needs. They are looking for answers about how to address the needs of the talented writer while at the same time provide the support required for the struggling student.

At the District level, additional challenges must be met. How can the momentum of the writing initiative be sustained with reduced resources, support, and time for professional development? The impact of budget cuts amounting to \$6.5 million over a two-year period has been severe on District literacy programs. At the elementary level, Lead Literacy Teacher positions, a vital part of the leadership infrastructure, were eliminated. The position of Elementary Literacy TOSA was reduced from full time to .4 FTE in year one and to a one-day-a-week classroom teacher in year two. As a result, there is no Literacy Network, no Writing Research Collaborative, no Writing Summit, no districtwide events that celebrate student writing and their teachers' efforts. While the Literacy Training Team continues to provide professional development, it is the voluntary work of a few dedicated teachers. It is difficult to see how a model program developed by K-5 principals, staff, and teachers can be sustained over time with this kind reduction of resources.

At the secondary level, reduction of time for professional development and reduction of resources have also had their impact on developing an effective, well-articulated writing program. The position of Secondary Literacy Resource Teacher was reduced from fulltime to .5 FTE to elimination. Now a former instructional supervisor periodically works on secondary writing projects. Time to share best writing practices and learn new instructional strategies has to be carved out of one hour department meetings. Ideally, the secondary level would be following the model established so competently by the K-5 literacy leadership prior to budget reductions; it is not certain that will be able to occur.

MOVING FORWARD – NEXT STEPS

Elementary

Efforts will continue to refine and strengthen the teaching of writing in the classroom with a focus of extension of best writing practices in the content areas. In the fall, teachers will begin implementing new core literature units with strong components of writing and differentiated instruction.

Secondary

The secondary level is beginning to implement a comprehensive writing framework, following the path set by K-5. Next steps will include expanding the use of the middle school writing matrix and professional development to promote consistent expectations, instructional practices, and assessment. Additionally, the extension of a writing matrix will be developed for Grades 9 and 10. To support implementation of the matrix, writing resource binders and a matrix-based assessment system need to be developed for Grades 6-8. Also, professional development, as identified in the teacher writing survey, should be provided to support teachers' efforts to implement an exemplary writing program.

If the challenges of lack of time and reduced resources can be addressed, the District now has a foundation that will lead to increasingly consistent districtwide expectations and performance, better articulation among grade levels and schools, and a common language and understanding among teachers, administrators, students, and parents.

RECOMMENDATION

This item is for information only and no action is required.

Attachment

7. I generally teach writing _____ days per week.

8. Think about all of the instructional strategies for teaching writing that you use during the school year. Overall, about how often do you use the following writing process activities? Mark the most appropriate column for each activity.

	<i>some writing projects</i>	<i>many writing projects</i>	<i>every writing project</i>	<i>not applicable</i>
<i>Prewriting experiences</i>				
8a. touchstone books*				
8b. writing based on hands-on experiences (science experiment, field trip)				
8c. mini-lesson on writer's craft				
8d. outline/web				
<i>Writing Process</i>				
8e. brainstorming				
8f. first draft				
8g. revise				
8h. edit				
8i. conferencing with teacher				
8j. conferencing with peer				
8k. publish				
<i>Other:</i>				
<i>Other writing process activities, particularly for Kindergarten and Grade 1</i>				
8l. interactive writing				
8m. writing aloud				
8n. assisted writing				
<i>Other:</i>				

* A touchstone book is an exemplary piece of children's literature that enhances children's writing.

9. Think about the way you teach 6-trait writing in your classroom. Circle the number on the scale that indicates the degree of emphasis that you place on each of the traits. **K-1 teachers:** please complete as well, given that it is understood that you may do these as interactive processes with your class.

	not much emphasis			strong emphasis
9a. Ideas	1	2	3	4
9b. Organization and focus	1	2	3	4
9c. Conventions/Mechanics	1	2	3	4
9d. Sentence Structure/Fluency	1	2	3	4
9e. Voice	1	2	3	4
9f. Word choice	1	2	3	4
9g. Presentation	1	2	3	4

10. List the touchstone books that are most powerful for teaching (5 titles maximum) and the related writing trait(s)/author's craft. In column 10c, list other resources you use regularly.

10a. Book Title	10b. Trait(s)/Author's Craft Focus

10c. Other Resources (e.g., professional books)

11. I teach grammar/convention lessons _____ days per week.

12a. Two examples of materials I use for teaching grammar/conventions, including commercial and teacher-made, are:

12b. Please identify strategies and materials you use that are particularly effective in teaching grammar/conventions to EL students.

13. Types of Writing

Listed in Column A in the table below are types of writing that all students are expected to master by the end of grade 5. **For each type of writing:**

- 1- Check one column under B, *Estimated number written per year*, to indicate approximately how many times your students will engage in that particular type of writing during 2004-05.
- 2- In addition, check column C if this type of writing is done as an interactive/class project rather than independently by students.

For example:

You are a 4th grade teacher and your students write well constructed paragraphs 9 times/year.

Your answer would look like this:

	B) Estimated number written per year			C) Interactive / Class Project
	1-3	4-6	7+	
well constructed paragraphs			X	

You are a Kindergarten teacher and your students write stories together as a class 4 times/year.

Your answer would look like this:

	B) Estimated number written per year			C) Interactive / Class Project
	1-3	4-6	7+	
stories		X		X

Table 13				
A) Types of writing	Individual Student Writing			Group Writing
	B) Estimated number written per year			C) Interactive / Class Project
	1-3	4-6	7+	
<i>Expository / Informational</i>				
13a. letters				
13b. paragraphs				
13c. reports				
13d. response to literature				
13e. summaries				
13f. functional (directions & procedures); science/math notebooks				
13g. persuasive letters/ essays				
13h. evaluations				
<i>Narrative</i>				
13i. stories (fiction, folk/fairy/tall tales)				
13j. memoirs/autobiographies (personal experience)				
13k. <i>Poetry</i>				
13l. <i>Other</i>				

14. List and/or briefly describe the ways in which you assess students' writing.

15. Communicating Progress to Parents

15a. How do you communicate students' writing progress to parents (e.g., display in classroom, send home)?

15b. About how often do parents see drafts with teacher or student corrections/revisions? (This includes writing in all content areas.)

for *some* writing projects

for *many* writing projects

for *every* writing project

not applicable

16. Professional Development

Circle the number on the scale that indicates how useful you have found each professional development session listed. Circle n/a if you have not participated in a related training session.

	not useful			very useful	not applicable
16a. 6-Trait	1	2	3	4	n/a
16b. Using Rubrics/Assessments	1	2	3	4	n/a
16c. Writing in Content Areas	1	2	3	4	n/a
16d. Using Touchstone Books	1	2	3	4	n/a
16e. Writers Workshop	1	2	3	4	n/a
16f. Primary Writing (Lucy Caulkins)	1	2	3	4	n/a

17. Your input is important for planning appropriate professional development activities.

List any aspects of writing instruction for which you would benefit from additional professional development sessions.

18. We welcome additional comments.

Thank you for your time and effort.