

The Write Way

Budget cuts are forcing writing out of the classroom, but it remains the foundation of strong literacy and achievement. Is it a focus in your district?

There are no silver bullets in education. But writing—particularly nonfiction writing—is about as close as you can get to a single strategy that has significant and positive effects in nearly every other area of the curriculum. Nonfiction writing is the backbone of a successful literacy and student achievement strategy.

Research over the past decade from Columbia and Vanderbilt universities and the University of Utah, among many others, concludes that, when students improve the quantity and quality of their writing, they improve in read-

ing comprehension, math, science, and social studies.

The cost of poor writing

Employers spend more than \$3 billion each year teaching writing skills to employees, much of which could be saved if schools and students devoted more time and attention to writing. A majority of college professors report that many of their students, even though they qualified for admission to a college or university, are unprepared for the rigors of college-level writing and thus consume time and resources

on remedial writing courses.

At the other end of the grade-level spectrum, elementary teachers report that, while their students are reading fluently and quickly, they continue to struggle with reading comprehension, particularly for complex informational texts. Certainly, nothing is wrong with strong phonics-based reading programs. They are necessary elements of a comprehensive literacy curriculum, but more is needed. Reading quickly and clearly is nice, but hardly an accomplishment when students do not understand the information they are reading.

Defying the evidence

You might think that, with such a clear-cut case for student writing, education leaders across the land would be encouraging greater levels of writing in every part of the curriculum. Unfortunately, the reality is the opposite. Because of state budget cuts, some states, such as Illinois, are not going to include student writing results in their state assessments.

The stunning reaction of many school systems has been to de-emphasize writing. After all, if it's not on the test, then it must not be important. In other schools, the myopic focus on a strict adherence to a prescribed reading curriculum has led some teachers to contend that they are not permitted to teach writing during their "literacy block" because they must devote literacy time exclusively to reading skills.

This wrongheaded approach denies research that shows that, when students improve their ability to describe, explain, and persuade in writing, they also improve their reading comprehen-



sion. And when they improve their skills in writing and reading, they also improve their performance—even on multiple choice tests—in math, science, social studies, and other subjects.

Getting writing right

In Lake Villa School District #41 in Illinois, a K-8 system with 3,300 students and five schools, the teachers, administrators, and school board members have not wavered in their support of student writing. While the number of students speaking English as a second language has increased along with the number of students from low-income families, student achievement has been on the rise.

Superintendent John Van Pelt explains that writing has been central to Lake Villa's achievement strategy. "We monitor student writing every six weeks, for a total of six writing assessments every year," says Van Pelt. "Our teachers designed the writing scoring rubrics and the prompts, and they have a high degree of pride and ownership in this. We start early and never quit, emphasizing writing in every class from kindergarten through eighth grade," he concludes.

Collaboration that works

Lake Villa teachers score their writing assessments individually and collaboratively, helping one another to provide accurate and consistent feedback to students. "They don't want to disappoint one another," Van Pelt says, "so they work really hard at this. It's a matter of personal and professional pride for them." Even the superintendent has participated in scoring sessions, helping to ensure that scoring guidelines are clear and applied consistently.

All of this hard work has paid off with impressive results. While only 50 percent of Lake Villa students were proficient in writing in 2007, 78 percent achieved proficient or advanced levels of writing in 2010. The district also has

improved in reading, mathematics, and science, even as poverty levels in the district have increased.

The focus on literacy would not have been possible, Van Pelt says, without strong community and board support. "They can't believe the level of writing our students are doing, and I hear that especially from the parents of very young children. It's far more advanced than they expected."

The role of the board was critical to maintain a consistent focus over four consecutive years. While the membership of the board has changed significantly since 2007—only two of the seven board members who approved the curriculum remain—the commitment of the board to this unusual writing program remains. "They ask for

detailed explanations and demand accountability," says Van Pelt, "and they are relentless in their support of literacy as our No. 1 focus."

Van Pelt is not concerned about the fact that the state may not use writing assessments in the future. "We're doing the right thing," he says flatly, "and that's all there is to it. Writing helps kids get ready for high school, college, and life, and we're not going to stop just because it's not on the test." ■

Douglas B. Reeves (dreeves@leadandlearn.com) is an author and founder of The Leadership and Learning Center, which provides professional development services, research, and solutions for educators and school leaders who serve students from prekindergarten through college.