The Writing Matters Program
2007-2008 Writing Skill Gains

Introduction

The Writing Matters Program was conceived by Dr. Robert Vogel based on his collaboration with Erin Gruwell, founder of the Freedom Writer’s Program, and his work with urban middle school students and teachers in Philadelphia over the past five years. The first Writing Matters Program was piloted during the 2005-2006 academic year at Grover Washington, Jr. Middle School (GWJ) with eighth grade students in Philadelphia with much success. The program was again implemented at GWJ the following year with all eighth grades participating. Despite the great success of this program at GWJ the program was not implemented the 2007-2008 academic year at this school due to a change in the administration of that school. However this year two, new Philadelphia schools agreed to participate: La Salle Academy (grades 6, 7, & 8) and the Renaissance Charter School (grades 7 & 8). The results delineated below provide an overview of the gains made by both school populations in their writing skills.

Writing Skills Assessment

As a way to measure the extent to which students of both schools made progress over the year in their writing skills as a result of the Writing Matters Program, both beginning and end of the year journals were scored by an independent evaluator hired by the project staff. The pre- and post-test writing samples were judged based on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment Writing rubric\(^1\). The rubric contains the following domains measured on a scale from 1 (low) to 4 (high):

- **Focus** (The writer clearly addresses the topic; an assertion or thesis topic is made; writing responds directly to prompt)
- **Content** (Assertions are supported with relevant details that support the main idea)
- **Organization** (An introduction and conclusion are evident; content is arranged in appropriate order; transitional devices are used)
- **Style** (Specific language and sentence structure are used to promote voice and tone; the writer is aware of “audience”)
- **Conventions** (Includes grammar, mechanics, spelling, usage, and sentence formation)

Two schools participated in the Writing Matters Program during the 07-08 school year: La Salle Academy (grades 6\(^{th}\), 7\(^{th}\), & 8\(^{th}\)) and the Renaissance Charter School (grades 7\(^{th}\) & 8\(^{th}\)). Students at both schools made significant gains in their writing as evidenced by the following Figures, Tables, and discussion.

\(^1\) Information obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, *Writing Assessment Handbook*. 

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La Salle Academy

A total of 45 students at La Salle Academy (LSA) in grades 6, 7, & 8 participated in the Writing Matters Curriculum over the year. As Figure A below shows, all writing domains showed markedly even gains over the year. Out of a possible rubric score of four points, pre-test data reveal that students at this school scored from a low of 1.82 to a high of 2.12. Post-test data reveal a range of 2.64 to 2.81 respectively (see Table 1).

Figure A: La Salle Academy (aggregate data from grades 6, 7, & 8)

Table 1: La Salle Academy pre and post-test aggregate scores.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>La Salle Academy</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Content Development</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Conventions</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRE</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POST</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A post-test analysis of gains made over the year in all categories reveals the highest percentage gains were made in the domains of content development, organization and style (see Figure B below).
Figure B: La Salle Academy

Percent gains in each writing domain.

Renaissance Charter School

A total of 118, 7\textsuperscript{th} and 8\textsuperscript{th} grade students participated in the Writing Matters Program at the Renaissance Charter School. As depicted in Figure C below, participating students showed significant gains based on an analysis of pre- and post-test writing samples.

Figure C: Renaissance Charter School (grades 7 & 8)
It is important to note that on the pre-test, 16 journals were judged unscorable, indicating that these writing samples did not contain enough content to be scorable or the writing was deemed illegible. On the post-test, however, only 4 journals were judged unscorable, showing growth in this critical area for 12 students.

Table 2 below shows the range of scores from the PSSA writing rubric from pre-test to post-test. Scores on the pre-test showed a range of scores from a low of 1.14 to a high of only 1.27, which depict a class of students with minimal writing skills. The post-test scores improved showing a range of 1.9 to 2.05 out of 4 possible points for each category. So, although improvement in writing was evidenced, there is a continued need for writing growth for this group of students.

Table 2: Renaissance Charter School pre- and post-test aggregate scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Renassanaince Charter School</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Content Dev.</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Conventions</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRE</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POST</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>1.99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure C below depicts percentage gains in each writing domain made over the year by participating Renaissance students. Growth in all writing domains were evenly divided among the categories with the largest gain (23%) noted in the area of organization.

Figure C: Renaissance Charter School

Percentage gains in each writing domain.
Overall, the two participating schools showed significant increases in writing based on pre- and post-test journal samples using the PSSA writing rubric. Both schools raised their scores by almost one point on a scale of 4. All writing domains improved to achieve these results.

The results of the 2006-2007 PSSA writing evaluation of the Grover Washington eighth grade students participating in the Writing Matters Program revealed significant gains only in the focus and content areas of the rubric. With more focus on all aspects of writing this year in the Writing Matters Program, it can be concluded that based on last year’s results, students made more progress in their writing across all writing domains as a result of this emphasis.