The Writers Matter Program was implemented in several Philadelphia area public and private schools during the 2009/2010 academic year. The table below provides an overview of the schools that participated in the Program and the data analyzed. All teachers received professional development via monthly meetings held at La Salle University. The following table outlines the various schools, teachers, participating grade levels and data used:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Grade levels</th>
<th>Data collected and Analyzed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amy NW</td>
<td>Saudia Bickley</td>
<td>7th and 8th</td>
<td>End-of-year surveys&lt;br&gt;Teacher monthly logs&lt;br&gt;Teacher focus group&lt;br&gt;Teacher survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CW Henry</td>
<td>Francesca Cantarini</td>
<td>Two 8th grade “treatment” groups; One 7th grade “control” group</td>
<td>End-of-year surveys&lt;br&gt;Pre-post journals&lt;br&gt;Teacher monthly logs&lt;br&gt;Teacher focus group&lt;br&gt;Teacher survey&lt;br&gt;Teacher survey&lt;br&gt;Sentence level analysis of journals (Allen)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LingelBach</td>
<td>Roxanne Holmes</td>
<td>7th and 8th grade students</td>
<td>End-of-year surveys&lt;br&gt;Teacher monthly logs&lt;br&gt;Teacher focus group&lt;br&gt;Teacher survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leeds</td>
<td>Katherine Muc</td>
<td>8th grade</td>
<td>End-of-year surveys&lt;br&gt;Teacher monthly logs&lt;br&gt;Teacher focus group&lt;br&gt;Teacher survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vare</td>
<td>Erin Cunningham</td>
<td>8th grade</td>
<td>End-of-year surveys&lt;br&gt;Teacher monthly logs&lt;br&gt;Teacher focus group&lt;br&gt;Teacher survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wagner</td>
<td>Efrain Marimon</td>
<td>7th grades “treatment” groups and control group</td>
<td>Data was not analyzed due to failure to submit post assessments or end-of-year surveys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NW Parkway</td>
<td>Geoffrey Winikur</td>
<td>9th grade</td>
<td>Teacher monthly logs&lt;br&gt;Teacher focus group&lt;br&gt;Teacher survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DePaul Catholic</td>
<td>Steve Clark</td>
<td>6th, 7th, 8th grades</td>
<td>Teacher monthly logs&lt;br&gt;Teacher focus group&lt;br&gt;Teacher survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends Select</td>
<td>Dianna Newton</td>
<td>8th grade</td>
<td>Teacher monthly logs&lt;br&gt;Teacher focus group&lt;br&gt;Teacher survey</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following provides an overview of the research data:

- Pre-and Post-journal entries (September and June) to analyze writing skill development over time based upon the PSSA Writing Rubric;
- End-of-Year surveys completed by students who participated in the program to gauge their feelings about the impact of the program on their writing, goal-setting, and social development;
- Monthly teacher logs that chronicle the Writers Matter lessons that they taught throughout the year;
- End-of-Year Teacher surveys concerning their perceived impact of the program on student development and their own instructional skills;
- Focus group data based on a meeting with all teachers involved in the Writers Matter Program answering various questions;
- End-of-Year Mentor Surveys concerning the perceived impact their work had on student learning and development as well as their own personal growth, and;
- Focus group data based on a meeting with mentors to collectively determine the impact of the program on student learning and their own development.

**Results**

The following sections provide an overview of the Writers Matter research results from participating schools. The first section provides an analysis of student data in the form of pre-post journals and end-of-year surveys. The middle section provides an analysis of data generated by participating teachers regarding their monthly Writers Matter lesson plans (logs), end-of-year survey, and focus group data. The third section of this report focuses on the La Salle University mentors regarding their views on being a mentor in this program and what they learned from the experience (survey and focus group). A discussion section at the end of the report provides an integration of these data results and provides recommendations for next year.

**Student Data**

**Pre-and Post-Journal Data**

The CW Henry school was targeted for an extensive analysis of pre-post journal data due to the: 1) extraordinary effort on the part of the teacher to implement the program as designed, and 2) experimental and control groups were used at this school. The latter provides best evidence of the program’s effectiveness since the researcher can compare the writing skill development of students who participated in the program (experimental) against the writing skill development of those who did not participate in the program (control).
Writing skills were measured based on the extent to which students made progress over the year as a result of the Writers Matter Program. 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)

A total of 61 pre-and post-matched journals were evaluated from this school. Approximately 23 additional journals were analyzed but not used because they could not be matched. The latter is likely due to students moving from or entering the district during the year or absences on the day the pre-or post-journals were assigned. Results from the three grades at CW Henry (two experimental groups and one control group) revealed the following results (see Table 1):

### Table 1: Comparison of PSSA Writing Rubric Scores by Category and Group (Experimental/Control)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade 8 (Rm 208-experimental) N = 20</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Organiz.</th>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Conventions</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>1.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>2.87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade 8 (Rm 209-experimental) N=23</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Organiz.</th>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Conventions</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade 7 (control) N = 18</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Organiz.</th>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Conventions</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>1.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>2.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that each student’s pre-and post journals were matched therefore a comparison was made between each student’s pre- and post-writing performances over time. The table above depicts the class average after students’ pre-and post journals were evaluated (1-4, with 4 the highest score). Unmatched journals were discarded from the data set (e.g., students who submitted a pre-journal, but no post-journal, or vice versa).

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1 Information obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Writing Assessment Handbook.
Figure 1 above shows the results of the total writing rubric scores for two experimental (treatment groups) and one control (non-treatment group) from CW Henry. The analysis revealed that the grade 8, experimental group in Room 208, made the most progress in their writing skills from pre-to post-journal writing compared to grade 8, the experimental group in Room 209 and the grade 7 control group. The seventh grade group, who did not participate in the Writers Matter Program, made the least writing skill progress from pre-to post compared to the two 8th grade participating classes.

Figure 2 above depicts the rubric scores of 8th grade students in room 208 who participated in the program. The results reveal that students in this class made the most gain in the areas of content (1.5) and focus (1.45). Content in persuasive writing refers to a student’s ability to present a focused argument that includes a clear position supported by relevant evidence. Focus refers to a student’s ability to write a convincing and focused essay based on awareness of task and audience. As noted in Figure 2 and the
earlier discussion, room 208 made the more progress (1.28 from pre-to post total scores) when compared to the other experimental group (room 209) and control group.

Figure 3 below illustrates the growth in reading skills based on rubric categories from pre- to post-journal analyses for the other participating 8th grade class. Room 209 made gains in all rubric categories although the gains were not as large as the gains made by students in room 208. However, these gains were found to be greater than the pre- to post-journal writing gains made by the control group. The largest gain was found in the focus domain (.67), closely followed by a .61 gain in the organization category. Increases in organizational skills show that students were able to use more effective organizational structures, such as logical order and transitions.

*Figure 3: Analysis of Experimental Group (Rm 209) Pre- and Post Journal Rubric Scores by Category*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade 8 (Rm 209) Pre-Post Journals</th>
<th>Experimental Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>1.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organiz.</td>
<td>1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventions</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4: Analysis of Control Group (Grade 7) Pre- and Post Journal Rubric Scores by Category*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade 7 Pre-Post Journals</th>
<th>Control Group (no program)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>2.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>2.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organiz.</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventions</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 7th grade control group made the least amount of gains based on an analysis of pre- and post-journals compared to the two treatment groups as depicted in Figure 4 above. The largest gain (.56) was
found in the organization category, with style and convention domains each showing a gain of .55, indicating that the students’ grammar and syntax improved as well as their control of language and sentence structures that create a consistent tone of voice. It is interesting to note that unlike the treatment groups, this 7th grade class scored lowest in the areas of content and focus.

Figure 5: Comparison of PSSA Writing Rubric Pre-Post Score Gains by Class

Figure 5 above depicts the PSSA Writing Rubric gains made by each class by calculating the difference between pre- and post-journal total scores in each domain evaluated. For example, a gain of 1.45 in grade 8, room 208, was calculated by subtracting the pre-journal class average score of “2” from the post-journal score of 3.45 in the area of “focus” (see Table 1) Note that students in grade 8, room 208, scored the highest gains when compared to the other two classes, and the 8th grade, room 209 class, made slightly more gains based on rubric domains than the control group with the exception of the style category. In “style” the control group outscores the experimental 8th grade group by 0.1.

It is important to note that the 7th grade control group’s pre-test journal rubric scores were quantitatively higher than either the experimental or treatment group. This may indicate that this class entered 7th grade with higher writing skills than either of the two 8th grade treatment groups. Despite these higher entering scores, the 7th grade control group made smaller gains compared to the two treatment groups. The Pre-Journal total rubric scores by class are shown in Figure 6 below.
In summary, the treatment groups (grade 8, rooms 208 and 209) made more gains overall than the 7th grade control group with respect to total rubric pre- and post-scores. The control group’s pre-test journal scores were higher than either eight grade pre-test scores indicating that the 7th grades may have had slightly more advanced writing skills than either treatment groups upon entering school in September. However despite this advantage, the treatment groups consistently outscored the control group based on this PSSA Writing rubric journal analysis. The gains made in the treatment groups were found in the domains of focus, content, and organization whereas modest gains by the control group were found in the organization, style and conventions areas. Since the Writers Matter Program concentrates on personal, informative, and persuasive writing it is logical to infer that accelerated development in the domains of content, organization, and focus would likely occur.

End-of-Year Surveys by Participating Students

Participating students from Amy NW, CW Henry, Morris E. Leeds, and Lingelbach middle schools completed end-of-year surveys which asked them to share their thoughts as to how the Writers Matter Program helped or did not help them on various dimensions. A total of 275 surveys were analyzed from these schools. The survey questions follow:

- Describe how the Writers Matter Program has influenced your writing skills. Has it helped you to become a better writer?
- Have the writing assignments helped you to better understand yourself? Please explain.
- Have the writing assignments helped you to better understand others? Please explain.
- If another student said to you, “I will be involved in the Writers Matter Program next year. What was it like for you? What did you learn?” How would you respond?
Figure 7 below depicts a descriptive statistical analysis of the 275 surveys based on the four questions posed. The data reveal that a large majority of participating students reported positive impacts of the Writers Matter Program in the areas of improved writing, self-understanding, and understanding others. A large majority also indicated that the program was very helpful or enjoyable. Out of 275 surveys only five students reported that the program did not help them at all. This is a remarkable finding showing that the program was viewed as beneficial to most students. The following quotes exemplify the view of the five students who reported some dissatisfaction with the program:

“I’d say it was boring cause (sic) I don’t like writing and I learned nothing because I didn’t pay attention to it.” (Amy NW)

“I didn’t really care much for it. It was always boring to me. Mostly everything that was taught to us I already knew.” (Henry)

Figure 7 below shows each school’s survey results with respect to the percentage of students who agreed that the Writers Matter Program helped them to improve writing skills, self-understanding, and understanding others. The highest percentage scores for three out of four schools occurred in the writing domain, while the next highest scores were represented in the “program was helpful” category. The surveys also revealed that a high percentage of participating students believed that the program assisted them in better understanding themselves and their peers.

A qualitative analysis of survey data revealed several sub-themes emerging from student responses in the areas of writing progress, personal enlightenment, social development, and overall
program effects. These themes are reported using student quotes representing the majority view across schools in the categories listed below.

Progress in Writing

Enhanced writing skills. A majority of students revealed that the program enhanced their writing skills as evidenced by several quotes representing the majority opinion. Students revealed that they learned to write more freely and expressively, saw positive changes in their writing over time, and learned how to write more descriptively with increased grammar skills.

“The Writers Matter program has made my writing skills better. It taught me how to clearly express myself so others understand.” (Leeds)

“The writers matter program has influenced my writing skills by helping me write complete sentences, make (sic) my stories more interesting, and staying on topic without rambling on.” (Henry)

“Writing is just another style of art.” (Leeds)

“I learned the importance of writing.” (Leeds)

“It influenced me because as I wrote everyday… I began to see a change in my writing before and now.” (Lingelbach)

“The program helped me with puncuation and parts of speech. I have been able to express myself and my feelings. The program has enabled me to write like I never have before.” (Amy NW)

“The Writers Matter program has help[ed] me to describe myself more, and to get deep in my response.” (Lingelbach)

“Writers Matter has helped me to express myself better on paper. When I start to write now I know [what I need] such as outline, first draft, final draft, etc. I express myself better.” (Lingelbach)

Enhanced confidence. Numerous students noted that their confidence in writing has improved as a result of being a part of the program as the following quotes illustrate:

“The writers matter program has influenced my writing skills because now I have lots of pride while writing.” (Henry)

“I learned about grammar and spelling. It helps you boost your courage. You might think you can’t do a certain writing assignment but this program gives you the knowledge for you to do it.” (Leeds)

“When I first started writing in the 7th grade I was nervous and my hands were shaking because I thought that what I wrote would be wrong, but now I don’t think what I write is wrong.” (Lingelbach)
“I never knew I was a good writer.” (Henry)

_Free Expression._ A majority of survey responses indicated that the program helped them to write more freely and openly:

“When we have journals I get to express myself in ways that I have never done before. Also, when we have to write stories, it’s like a waterfall of words.” (Amy NW)

“It helped me to get my thoughts out on paper. Before I would have (sic) trouble writing and getting started. But now things tend to flow out easier.” (Henry)

“The writing assignments helped me because I can express my feelings in writing.” (Leeds)

“I got to express myself in ways I couldn’t even imagine. I learned how writing can open doors for you and how amazing it is.” (Henry)

Personal enlightenment

_Self-knowledge._ A majority of students revealed that the Writers Matter Program helped them to know themselves more deeply due to the personal nature of the writing tasks. This personal exploration has led many students to develop a newfound understanding of self, which has allowed them to grow in their maturity and confidence. The following quotes exemplify the majority viewpoint:

“It has helped me realize my everyday life can and does have a meaning…” (Leeds)

“We mostly write about ourself and it makes us think about ourself.” (Leeds)

“…it makes me understand my life that everyone’s not perfect…including me.” (Leeds)

“I have learned to accept myself just for the way I really am. [The program] matured me.” (Lingelbach)

“It helped me through difficult times or memories that I didn’t like. I learned a lot from my mentors and teacher. They taught me how to see the world differently.” (Henry)

“When I look back on the assignments that I wrote, I can read them and decipher my feelings through it. I can look at it and feel my emotions on the page.”

“The prompts we were given helped me to critically think about what goes on in my life and all over the world.” (Henry)

“It has made me feel like a better person.” (Leeds)

“It helped me to know myself and to be confident.” (Leeds)

“The writing assignments have helped me better understand myself. I realized that I don’t have to be so mean, uptight, or self conscious.” (Amy NW)

“It made me open up more. It has taught me how to not be afraid to show my feelings.” (Amy NW)
“The writing assignments have help[ed] me understand myself in a better way because they’ve taught me how to express all of my feelings and emotions.” (Lingelbach)

**Coping with stress.** In some cases students revealed that by being allowed to freely express their thoughts and experiences enabled them to relieve stress and to use writing as an alternative to self-doubt or violence. The following quotes illustrate this view:

- “It allowed me to express my feelings without acting the wrong way.” (Leeds)
- “I learned to express myself and not to be shy. I also learned that your (sic) not the only one with family issues so it’s okay to talk it out and get all that stress off your chest.” (Lingelbach)
- “It helped me understand myself but it also helped me get my anger out or what I had to say about something. It helped me think in creative ways to understand myself more.” (Henry)
- “The writers matter program let me express myself in a non-violent way. I learned that writing can relieve your stress.” (Amy NW)
- “The program helped me with my anger. I learned how to express my feelings without hurting myself or others.” (Amy NW)
- “I would say that this program has helped to ease the pain away by writing and I learned that writing can be a savior.” (Lingelbach)

**Increased motivation/goal setting.** The program reportedly helped many students make positive changes in their lives. Some students revealed that they have increased their motivation to work harder, while others established long term goals and a plan to achieve those goals. These ideas are expressed in the following quotes:

- “It made me strive to do my best.” (Lingelbach)
- “It helped me understand the real me and helped me change me for the better.” (Amy NW)
- “It has let me find out what I want in life and how I [am] going to get it.” (Amy NW)
- “The program has helped me find me; it was like an open door waiting for me to jump out of it. It stretched my mind, body, and emotions.” (Leeds)
- “I learned that sometimes you need to force yourself to try even harder.” (Lingelbach)

**Social Awareness**

**Deeper understanding of peers.** Themes relating to the social world of adolescents revealed that hearing peers’ stories and poems enabled participating students to see that many of them share similar
challenges and struggles. This resulted in numerous Writers Matter participants gaining a deeper insight and understanding of their fellow classmates. The following quotes exemplify this viewpoint:

“Reading other people’s poems helped me to understand that everyone is going through their own personal problems.” (Leeds)

“I learned that I am not alone in the world.” (Leeds)

“It has helped me to understand [that] others have the same struggles and joys I have.” (Leeds)

“My feelings are similar to other peoples. Learning about other people has made me know that I’m not the only one.” (Lingelbach).

“The writing assignments helped me to understand others. From them sharing their stories with me, it not only helped me to understand them better but it also helped me to know that I am not the only one that has to go through struggles.” (Lingelbach)

“I feel that their writing gave me a chance to get to know them on a deeper level.” (Henry)

“It made me realize that I am not the only one with problems.” (Amy NW)

“[The writing assignments] helped me better understand the way my classmates think and their personalities… as very heartfelt human beings.” (Amy NW)

Social Maturity. Students took away several lessons from hearing their peers’ life stories. Some of these lessons had to do with not judging people too quickly based on casual observations. Getting to know other students’ situations appeared to enable many of the Writers Matters students to become more empathetic or change the way they interact with people as illustrated in the following quotes:

“It showed me how not to judge people so quickly.” (Amy NW)

“When my classmates read aloud it helped me understand that nobody is perfect but you can’t stop living your life because of one mistake.” (Henry)

“The writing assignments has (sic) definitely help[ed] me better understand others, because my clasmates who I have had a negative opinion of has changed.” (Henry)

“The program taught me to listen to people more.” (Amy NW)

“[The program] made me care more about people’s feelings.” (Leeds)

Impact of the Program

The Writers Matter Program appeared to have a positive effect on the majority of students. When asked what they would say to another student who planned to take the program the following year, students shared a wide range of ideas that were similar to categories above. These responses had to do
with advancing writing skills, being allowed to freely express one’s thoughts, overcoming challenges, and setting personal goals. The following quotes show how some students were able to capture the power of this program through their words.

“The writers matter program has been a fun experience for me because not only are you learning about yourself but you learn about others. They teach you about the challenges you may face in life and how you can help overcome them. I’ve learned that you can’t judge people by their first appearance.” (Amy NW)

“I would say that it is a great program and you will understand writing better.” (Leeds)

“It was relaxing and fun. You get to release your mind full of bad things.” (Lingelbach)

“I learned that nobody could be left out and that people can stick together and cooperate very well. That’s what I learned in the Writers Matter project.” (Lingelbach)

“I believe that Writers Matter made everyone in my class a better person.” (Lingelbach)

“I would say to the student that it would be a very moving experience. That after it was all over you would be changed… I would say that this program could change your life and the way you view things.” (Henry)

“I would say that over time you will feel better about yourself.” (Henry)

“I learned that writing has more value than anything else if you put your heart into it.” (Amy NW)

“This program accelerates your writing ability tenfold.” (Amy NW)

“I would say that I learned about life and life is not a game.” (Amy NW)

In summary, the end-of-year surveys completed by students participating in the Writers Matter Program revealed many sub-themes: increased writing skill development, free expression and increased confidence, greater understanding of their peers, greater acceptance of difference and finding comfort in the fact that they are not alone in the challenges they face.

The concept of change or personal transformation appears to be underlying most of the survey responses. In essence, the program has enabled the majority of students to grow and change in a positive direction, whether the program served students by increasing writing skills, fostering greater goal setting, or self-understanding in the context of the larger community or world.

It should be noted that the five years of collecting end-of-year survey data has resulted in a positive saturation point. A saturation point is achieved when an analysis has been conducted year after year yielding very similar results. This is a significant finding because the program has been implemented
in many different schools with different teachers since 2005 yet the end-of-year survey results have remained the same. Therefore a strong conclusion can be drawn that this program, from the students’ perspective, does indeed improve writing skills, increase confidence in self and/or writing, and expand students’ view of their personal experiences in light of their peers’ challenges, and enable many students to view life from multiple perspectives. This transformation has also enabled some participating students to increase their motivation and drive to succeed and develop coping strategies to deal with their anger or self-doubt.

Teacher Data

Monthly Teacher Logs

Teachers were asked to submit monthly lesson plans that chronicled the weekly Writers Matter content taught to students. For the most part, teachers complied with this request although numerous reminders had to be given by project staff in order to ensure that all teachers submitted their logs in a timely manner. Some teachers faithfully submitted logs each month, while others submitted their logs in two or three month cycles. The latter is problematic from a research standpoint since it is unknown whether these teachers wrote their logs from memory or whether the content entered was from their teacher planbooks. Regardless, we were able to determine from these logs the extent to which the teachers faithfully planned activities that coincide with the Writers Matter scope and sequence as outlined in the book, *Voices of Teens: Writers Matter*. These data are vital to ensuring that the program is being implemented in the schools on a systematic basis so that the data analysis on various aspects of the program can be reliably reported.

Logs submitted from the following eight teachers/schools were evaluated: Bickley/Amy NW, Cantarini/Henry, Holmes/Lingelbach, Cunningham/Vare, and Muc/Leeds, Winikur/Parkway NW, Marimon/Wagner, and Clark/DePaul. These teachers followed the scope and sequence of the Writers Matter Program to greater and lesser extents. The logs of Cunningham and Cantarini were the strongest with regards to planning (and the assumption is that the lessons were then implemented). Bickley and Holmes admitted difficulty with creating Writing Matters lessons during the focus group session and a subsequent analysis of their logs revealed sporadic implementation of the program intermixed with standard, literacy curriculum plans. Muc’s logs indicated that she relied heavily on the La Salle University mentors to implement plans that they developed and, thus, if they were not available due to breaks, she reverted to the standard, literacy curriculum for her lessons. Winikur’s logs focused almost exclusively on the English curriculum that he teaches with little reference to Writers Matter topics so it is unclear as to the extent to which he used the Writers Matter curriculum in his lessons.
A common theme expressed by all of the teachers is that the Writers Matter Program was not implemented during March and part of April due to PSSA and other testing. At this time of year, the District’s focus is almost exclusively on test preparation and administration of tests.

A recommendation during prolonged testing periods would be to encourage teachers to use any free time afforded to students either before or directly after testing to write. The Writers Matter research results show very clearly that writing alleviates stress in many students so this would be a perfect way to provide students with time to write freely about test stress or other stressors in their lives.

Teacher Surveys

Eight teachers attended the final group meeting in which the survey and focus group data were administered and collected (Cunningham, Bickley, Holmes, Winikur, Muc, Clark, Cantarini, and Newton). The teachers were provided questionnaires to complete within a time frame of 30 minutes. The following questions were posed:

• If another teacher said to you, “I will be involved in the Writers Matter Program next year. What was it like for you?” How would you respond?

• Besides improvements in writing that you may have noticed among your students, describe one or two other important areas in which you saw student growth. Give examples.

• In what ways did your involvement in the Writers Matter Program enhance your teaching?

Survey responses were qualitatively analyzed using open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) procedures. This involves coding each sentence or paragraph for the essential main idea and then re-categorizing the data into larger chunks of meaning. In this way, it is assured that the true meaning of the teacher’s message is conveyed to the reader. All teachers answered the three questions fully. The following narrative describes the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data analysis with quotes from teachers to support that analysis.

Student Learning

The analysis revealed a myriad of sub-themes regarding teachers’ observations of student learning based on the Writers Matter experience. In many ways, these sub-themes mirrored the end-of-year surveys completed by their students. The sub-themes were: Greater emotional intelligence and maturity (7), enhanced relationships with their peers (7), student empowerment/student voice (7), student engagement (5) Writing development (5), and self-esteem/confidence (3). Note that the numbers following each sub-theme indicates the number of teachers who wrote on this topic.
Greater emotional intelligence and maturity. Seven teachers discussed how the students appeared to mature and grow emotionally stronger through this program. The following two quotes represent the majority view:

“My students were intrepid adventurers as writers; they supported each other. I saw boys share feelings that they previously had not, and while I cannot know it with any certainty, the space for personal exploration of feelings and thoughts definitely seemed to increase the emotional and empathetic intelligence on a number of my kids.” (Friends)

“Writing improvements were plentiful, however, their growth and maturity was evident as well. The students, upon entering in September, had difficulties expressing themselves. At first, when some shared their stories many laughed. The laughter was nervousness and immaturity. As the months progressed, the maturity level increased. The laughter minimized and the questions came, the concern was evident, and their maturity was a reality.” (Vare)

Enhanced relationships with their peers. Seven teachers noted the effect of the program on student awareness and understanding of their peers, which led to greater student acceptance of differences among them. This theme is exemplified in the following quotes:

“Students really come to respect the writing of their peers – both the strengths and vulnerabilities. They like hearing what others have to say and are not afraid to share loving support. There were many times when students celebrated each other quite vocally. (Parkway NW)

“I saw students dealing with topics that they might have otherwise kept locked away and I saw students supporting each other, and learning more about each other.” (DePaul)

“Mostly my students learned about each other and me. They learned about common ground and similarities, and also about honoring and understanding differences.” (Henry)

Student empowerment and voice. Seven teachers indicated that the program gave students a rare opportunity to voice their issues and concerns, which enabled students to be empowered. The following quotes illustrate this point:

“The open classroom experience where everyone has a voice, there is no room for judgment, contest, or fear. The experience of writing to relieve oneself, writing to free pain and writing to tell a story… I’d share the enjoyment my students had that they were heard and no feelings were negated.” (Vare)
“My kids, whose lives and daily schedules are so regimented and overscheduled by anxious adults really valued and appreciated the freedom of expression they had to write about whatever they wanted.” (Friends)

**Student Engagement.** Five teachers wrote that the program was engaging and motivating for the students. The following quotes exemplify the majority view:

“The Writers Matter Program created an empowering context for my 8th grade classes. Immediately, my students were engaged with the text and the program.” (Henry)

“The Writers Matter Program provides many opportunities to help teachers engage students. The program builds on the experiences of students in an accessible manner…” (Parkway NW)

**Writing Development.** Five teachers stated that the program enhanced writing development, largely because of the program’s focus on writing about personal experiences. Only one teacher indicated that the program itself did not help increase students writing skills as indicated in the quote below:

“I am not sure if the program improved the writing of my kids; they were excited; they were engaged, but in terms of improvements regarding sentence structure, sentence variety, and those kinds of things, I didn’t really see those kinds of improvements.” (Friends)

Five teachers addressed how the Writing Matters Program impacted their students writing as noted below:

“Ultimately, I found that good writers became better writers and the others started to look forward to journal writing.” (Lingelbach)

“Students learn that writing is a valuable vehicle for self-expression that others are extremely interested in what they have to say, that their writing can improve in ways that are visible to them, as well as others, and that expression can be liberating.” (Parkway NW)

“To thrive in a writing community, a writer must be willing to take risks, whether in genre, topics, or challenging emotional territory. I believe this program has encouraged that risk-taking and enabled students to write about and share “tough” topics – death, violence, drugs, absenteeism, etc.” (DePaul)

**Self-Esteem/Confidence.** Three teachers shared that the program helped their students develop self-esteem and confidence as indicated by the quotes below:

“I saw many students’ personal growth and transformation through this program. One student, Ashley, was kind of a self-stated ‘bad girl’ in the beginning of the year. As she opened up and shared herself with the class, she gained acceptance of herself from
herself and others. She went on to become the softball manager and wrote a speech for graduation.” (Henry)

“I saw children becoming more confident in themselves and their abilities because they were able to speak their minds about their issues and concerns.” (Amy NW)

“Just last week, students who never used to speak in class in September and October, took part in a talent show in front of the entire school. Self-esteem played a role.” (Vare)

Teacher Learning

Other subthemes emerged from the surveys regarding the professional benefits of teaching in the Writers Matter Program including: Establishing a classroom community/tolerance/respect (8), and challenging curriculum (5).

Establishing a classroom community with mutual tolerance and respect. Eight teachers shared that the Writers Matter Program helped them to know their students better and provided a forum for the emergence of a unique, respectful classroom atmosphere to flourish. The following quotes exemplify this point:

“Most importantly, the program was a platform to create and re-create a positive classroom culture. It gave us a space for every child to shine and express themselves. It gave us (me and my students) a safe place to share personal information and learn about each other on a much closer level. This helped foster an incredible student/teacher relationship which made all other teaching much more meaningful.” (Henry)

“Every child wants to know that his/her voice is heard. I knew this before, but this year it became more apparent through the Writers Matter Program – allowing each child time to journal made me more tolerant of their needs. Just as adults have good and bad days, so do our children.” (Leeds)

“This program let me get to know my students, their thoughts, their dreams, hardships, etc. in a way I probably would not have known.” (Lingelbach)

“It made me believe that I could create a “writing community” in each of the classrooms, and it challenged me to truly listen to what my students were saying.” (DePaul)

Challenging Curriculum. Five teachers discussed positives and negatives regarding having to integrate a variety of sources into the Writers Matter curriculum. Several teachers shared that this was a difficult challenge for them as indicated by the following quotes:
“As for my experience with the program I would have to say it was a lot more work than I expected.”

“The writing program has its ups and downs. I would say that it is a program that students can benefit from, however it is a program that can be really hard on a teacher. There is no curriculum that comes with this program, and that in order to do well they must be very creative.”

“Any challenges that exist don’t really come from Writers Matter, but more from the difficulty of incorporating the program into the daily life of the classroom, especially when there can be sudden, unexpected changes. I think that many teachers feel overwhelmed by all of the expectations, plus the ever-increasing dose of testing, and there are times when it can feel unmanageable.”

Other teachers found the integration of the Writers Matter program into their district curriculum to be a positive challenge as noted in the quotes below:

“No program challenged me more as a teacher to figure out ways to integrate the activities and goals of Vogel’s and Galbraith’s book with my already established curriculum of world literature. I developed units and lessons that I would [have] never created otherwise. I developed further as a teacher because I was asked to integrate the work from multiple places. I had to connect Writers Matter up with Lord of the Flies and The Ramayana. It made me and continues to make me a better teacher because of it.”

“One way my teaching was enhanced was it made me go back to basics in grammar, sentence structure, and style. Because I rarely write for pleasure, I began to appreciate the art of writing.”

“It helped me to continue to investigate both on a personal and professional level what actually reaches students. The program gave space for reflection on my overall teaching. It provided material for me to share with my colleagues to help them better understand their classes.”

In summary, all teachers completing the survey identified many positive benefits of the Writers Matters Program on students and their teaching. Teachers shared their views that by enabling students to write freely about their life circumstances helped to foster a greater understanding of their peers and tolerate differences. This connects to the establishment of a positive classroom community in which trust and mutual respect are a primary characteristic in effective Writers Matters classrooms. Teachers also reported on the increased maturity, confidence, and emotional intelligence of their students as a result of
being able to open up about their problems. Teachers commented that the curriculum is challenging to implement; some teachers were more successful than others in making it happen this year.

Focus Group Data

During the last Writers Matter meeting in June, the researcher conducted a focus group session will eight teachers attending. The focus group lasted approximately 1.5 hours. The researcher posed questions and took notes throughout the meeting. Focus group data typically enriches survey data in that it provides and opportunity for teachers to engage in a discussion with other teachers so, in essence, they can feed off others’ comments. The researcher did not participate in the conversation except to ask questions and clarifying some responses. The only other Writing Matters staff person attending this meeting was Dr. Marjorie Allen, English professor who is also involved in the research effort.

Questions posed to the group are listed as follows:

• The first question is about your experiences this year in the Writers Matter Program. Did anything about the program or your students’ reaction to the program surprise you?
• As you observed your students participating in the program, what did you learn about them? Did this help you teach them in other ways more effectively? If so, how? If not, why not?
• What other side benefits, besides writing and the other topics mentioned this evening, occurred as a result of the Writers Matter Program?

The researcher took 11 pages of notes which were then qualitatively analyzed using the open coding methods of Strauss and Corbin described earlier. Three primary themes emerged from the analysis of the transcript relating to student observations/development, teacher learning, and future recommendations for the program. Further analysis of the data revealed many different subthemes, which are detailed in the narrative below. Thus, the following section will provide an overview of the focus group data with respect to the three main themes listed above and a variety of sub-themes emerging from the qualitative analysis.

Student Observations/Development

The first subtheme emerging from the discussion had to do with differences among students. Regarding gender differences, one teacher reported that she was surprised that boys in her class were less likely to volunteer to share their personal stories in class; they want to share with the teacher only. Other teachers agreed that this might be the case in the beginning of the year, but reluctance on the boys’ part may be temporary in most cases as the year progresses. One teacher commented that he did not observe this gender difference in his 9th graders; the boys were fine and this teacher continued to state that negative reactions from other students may lead to an overall reluctance to share. Discussion centered on
differences between students with respect to sharing journal entries in class. One teacher indicated that response journals allowed some kids who do not like to talk in class to share in a different way (through writing). Another teacher shared how much courage it takes for students to get up in front of the class to share their stories.

The discussion evolved to how surprised some of the teachers were with respect to the quality of writing that emerged from student journals as a result of this program. The topics students chose to write about, the imagery, the language were all enhanced through this program. Another teacher noted that good writers became better writers and others learned how to write. Several teachers added to this topic by saying that the program raised students’ self-esteem and desire to participate more in school activities. Further, the program helped many students connect with other kids. Writing allowed students to put their thoughts on paper and develop more self-confidence as a result. Many were able to conquer “their issues.”

The topics of self-expression and empowerment emerged from the discussion. Several teachers discussed their observations that students appreciated the freedom to write about what was important to them. Knowing that their voices would be heard can be very empowering. One teacher commented that “teachers do not know what is in them [students] – their emotions, talents, thought processes, maturation, and growth.” This teacher elaborated by saying that students recognize that they possess something powerful and special that is worth sharing with others.

As a result of the in-class sharing of journal entries, several teachers observed positive differences in classroom climate. One teacher noted that her teaching was made easier because of the enhanced relationships among class members and with her. She stated, “Kids knew I was invested in them and they gave back.” Another teacher shared that the classroom community and culture was “unbelievable to me based on this program.”

Teacher Learning

Several teachers discussed the impact of the program on them. One teacher noted that she recognized just how judgmental she was and that this was something she has to work on. She used to put kids into categories all of the time, but this has changed with the knowledge she has gained about them through this program. Another teacher shared that the program was emotionally draining at times, listening to students’ problems and issues. Another teacher was shocked at some of the things her students have experienced.

The discussion revealed that teaching and personal relationships were enhanced as a result of this program. Several teachers shared that the enhanced knowledge of students’ experiences and problems has deepened the personal and meaningful connections they were able to establish with them. One teacher shared a story about a student that was at risk for failure. When he wrote about his father, his story helped
her to see something worthwhile in him that she would otherwise not have known. Another teacher noted that the program “raised the bar” because it fosters community in the classroom by enhancing the teacher/student relationship. The classroom becomes more collective as a result. In order to foster community, students have to rely on peers for unconditional support and acceptance. One technique that was used to enhance the community relationships between students was teacher modeling. The teacher would say, “I really like how Corine began her piece, etc.” After a while, the teacher reported that the students began to use these techniques.

An example of how one teacher changed with respect to becoming more knowledgeable and therefore more tolerant of her students is evidenced by this comment:

“I’ve changed. Last year I used to tell my students to ‘leave your baggage outside of the class before you come in.’ Kids came in anyway with baggage. I learned to be aware, to be tolerant, and understanding, and respectful. They need to know that they are not alone in the world.”

The idea that students respect their teachers more when they learn more about them surfaced in the discussion. One teacher noted that the students related to her better because they were interested to know about her life. Another teacher commented that students learn to respect the teacher because s/he seems “more human.”

Recommendations

The teachers had many recommendations for improvements. Most of these recommendations had to do with how to make the curriculum more accessible to teachers. The following are all of the recommendations put forth by the teachers during this focus group session:

- More assistance with how to implement this program.
- Need more activities and lesson plans.
- More collaboration among teachers to share lesson planning ideas.
- Need clear, reachable goals.
- The program needs to be more strategically aligned to the district curriculum with regard to integration with other content areas and reading strategies.
- The mentoring program needs to be better aligned to the district calendar.
- More information on how the teacher can differentiate instruction with this program.
- More information as to how the Writers Matter Program connects to required literature/readings.
- A web site would be helpful to allow sharing of lesson plans and ideas.
In summary, the focus group discussions provided further insight into the effects of the program on students and the teachers. Teachers questioned whether there is a gender difference with respect to a willingness to share personal stories in class. The idea that it is important to establish a safe and caring community was offered as a way to allay the fears of some students regarding sharing their personal stories. The program was touted by several teachers as having an impact on the quality of students’ writing with respect to imagery, language, and topics. The program was also believed to increase confidence and self-esteem of many students because of the cathartic effect of free expression.

The idea of self-expression is also believed to contribute to a positive classroom climate in which mutual respect and understanding are embedded into the culture. Knowing students, for many teachers, has enabled them to teach them more effectively. Students are more eager to learn if they know that the teacher is on their side. Some teachers recognized that the program helped them to be less judgmental. However for some, hearing these stories were emotionally draining and shocking.

The teachers shared several recommendations aimed at improving how this program is implemented by requesting more assistance with planning and implementing the program. In addition, a better alignment with and integration of the district curriculum would greatly assist participating teachers.

**Mentor Data**

In order to obtain a more complete view of the program, data was collected from La Salle University mentors who participated in the program throughout the year. At the end of April, a meeting was arranged with mentors and the researcher in order to collect survey and focus group data. Twelve mentors attended this meeting, which lasted approximately two hours. As a group, the mentors represent a wide range of majors and class levels. The mentors are a Leadership and Global Understanding minor, co-directed by Dr. Robert Vogel and Dr. Marjorie Allen. The following sections will provide an overview of the survey data completed by the mentors, qualitatively coded, as well as an analysis of the focus group data.

Mentors averaged about two hours per week in schools and their job was primarily to assist students in their writing. However, teachers utilized the mentors differently. Some assigned mentors to work one-on-one or in small groups with students, while other teachers allowed mentors to roam freely about the room to help any student in need. Further, in one classroom the mentors developed and implemented their own plans. Not all schools were assigned mentors. It should also be noted that the University and School District calendars differ with respect to school breaks, so there were times when schools were in session but mentors had left campus for their break. This coupled with teacher inservice, testing, and other scheduled events created less opportunities for students to benefit from the mentor program.
Survey Results

A total of 12 surveys were qualitatively coded (this method was described earlier). The following questions were listed on the survey:

- What did you gain from participating as a mentor in the Writers Matter Program?
- What did you learn about your students? How did this help to mentor them more effectively?
- Do you believe that you were able to help these students through the mentoring program? Is so, how? If not, why not?
- What changes did you see in your mentees over time?
- How has participating in this program changed you? How will it help in your future career?

Several themes emerged from this data. The major themes were: Greater understanding, student growth, and personal/professional learning. The following sections will provide an overview of the primary themes and sub-themes with quotes to support the data analysis.

Greater Understanding

This theme attempts to describe how work of the mentors helped them to understand, on a deeper level, the lives of their students and their educational situation. For many of the mentors, their work with urban students really opened their eyes to the struggles they face and a deeper understanding. In addition, it opened their eyes to the realities of urban schools and the family/social lives of the students as compared to their own experiences growing up. Approximately 14 separate references were made to this theme. The following quotes exemplify the majority view:

“I gained a lot of insight into the lives of Philadelphia’s youth. I learned about what their everyday life is like and the struggles they go through. I learned about their fears and anxieties, hopes, and goals.

“I had exposure to kids from different backgrounds and got to tap into their lives to see how different and the same they were from kids from my background. I also experienced the degree of quality there is to urban public education, which (from what I saw) ranged from satisfactory to pretty poor.”

In some cases the mentors’ understanding of their students’ challenges made them realize how difficult it is for students to stay focused on learning. The following quotes show the majority view:

“Some people assume that if kids aren’t doing well in school, they aren’t working hard enough. I can vouch, from personal experience now, that these kids have a lot going
on – a lot more than I ever had – and sometimes this conflicts (sic) with their performance.”

“I learned that these students have a lot of stressors in their lives, pressuring them to learn and improve in the midst of all of the family and social problems affecting them.”

Others discussed how the relationships with their students were nurtured by enhanced, mutual understanding as shown in the following quotes:

“They became more accustomed to me coming there, as I worked at the same school for this past year. It was great to see the strides we made in our relationship.”

“I saw that they opened up to me more, and became more excited to see me as time went on. They appeared to begin to handle daily problems better.”

“Not only did I help them with their writing but I made friendships with some of the students. After their work was complete we would talk about sports, life, or anything they were wondering [about].”

Student Growth

All mentors wrote about ways that they were able to help students in their writing except for one mentor who did not believe he was able to help his mentee. This mentor shared his view:

“I had a challenging mentee in that he was very unfocused. Personally, I don’t think I helped very much because our group wasn’t there often and most of the sessions lent themselves to horseplay by the boys.”

The largest sub-theme emerging from the mentors who believed that they were able to make a difference was helping students to open up more and express their feelings (11), followed by assisting with writing and critical thinking (5), being a role model (3), and listening to students (3).

Opening up. The largest category expressed by mentors in their surveys was their ability to help their students open up, in preparation for journal writing. The following quotes show the majority view:

“My mentees seemed to open up over time and become more relaxed as the semester went on. As a result, I believe that their writing has improved and they became more comfortable with us.”

“I saw my mentees open up to me more and their writing did improve.”

“They were more open to talking and being honest about their problems, and how they felt.”

Writing and critical thinking. Several mentors noted that their work helped students to write and to think in more organized ways as exemplified in the following quotes:
“I feel like they improved in grammar and syntax. They expressed themselves more clearly than they did in the beginning of the year as well.”

“They began to formulate ideas. Over a class period their thoughts became more organized and over the course of the semester most of the students showed an improvement in their writing and an interest in what the class was doing.”

**Being a role model.** For three mentors, being a role model for students participating in the program helped them to see what the future could be. The following quotes show their thinking on this topic:

“I believe that I was able to help these students. For the most part, their writing stayed consistently well, but I believe that they will be more apt and driven to do well in school and continue onto college because of our participation.”

“I think I was able to help them. I think they needed positive role models in their lives and I feel lucky to be able to be there for them.”

**Listening to students.** For several mentors, being there to listen rather than judge them was perceived to be a help to students. The following quotes provide a description of this sub-theme:

“I feel like I was there to listen to them and accept them for who they are. To be that young you feel like you are judged. It’s nice to feel like someone just wants to listen.”

“It’s all about letting them know you’re there to help not to judge.”

“I was someone who listened to their work and provided effective feedback.”

**Personal/Professional Learning**

All mentors agreed that they gained a lot from working with inner city youth in the Writers Matter Program. For most, this was an eye-opening experience that changed their world view. Others shared that the experience helped them to learn patience, come to a realization that they like to work with kids or want to teach in the future, learned how to teach literacy, and felt good about helping others. The transformative experience that this mentor work provided a majority of the participants is captured in the quotes below:

“Participating in the writers matter program has definitely given me a new outlook on life and how fortunate I was growing up compared to some of these kids. It makes me realize how much more work there is to do and how one person can make a difference.”

“Participation has given me new insights into the struggles and challenges that others experience with learning and has made me more open.”
“I am more aware of life outside my own. In the future I will be more open and accepting of others.”

“Each year I learn something new that changes me for the better. Helping others is a beautiful thing!”

One student noted that the experience really did not change him, but strengthened his commitment to education in the future:

“The program hasn’t really changed me as much as it has reaffirmed my beliefs about urban education. I think there’s a bit of common experience that all children have in America, in terms of the kinds of things they like and aspire to be. But I also remain committed to a career in education because I believe in the potential an education has in providing opportunities for all children, and I think there is much work to be done in realizing that potential.”

In summary, the mentors reported that their presence in the Writers Matter classrooms, for the most part, greatly assisted their own understanding of urban students and schools, as well as contributed to their learning and growth. Moreover, the mentors took away many life lessons from this experience that contributed to opening their eyes to a more diverse world. The mentors observed that many students from inner city schools are confronted with tremendous family and social challenges; these challenges were thought to interfere with the students’ ability to concentrate solely on their education. Establishing an open and trusting relationship with the students helped them to open up more about their feelings and write about them. Being a role model and a person who listened to students was raised as an important aspect of their work. As well, the mentors helped students to think and write in a clear and organized manner.

Their mentoring work fostered a new outlook on life for many since they were exposed to diverse cultures and schools. This “eye-opening” experience led some mentors to be more open-minded and look at life from a more global perspective.

**Focus Group**

At the end of April, twelve Writers Matters mentors gathered for a meeting to discuss their mentoring work throughout the year. The focus group session lasted approximately 1 hour. The researcher asked questions and clarified responses during that time. Notes were taken to be later qualitatively analyzed by the same researcher. Questions posed to the mentors include the following:
• What was most surprising to you when you first began to work in the schools as a mentor in the Writers Matter Program?
• Do you believe you contributed to student growth? In what ways?
• What suggestions do you have for this program moving forward with a mentor component?

Three primary themes emerged from the analysis of the transcript: schools and student attributes and mentoring perspectives. The following narrative provides an overview of these major themes and sub-topics.

Schools and Student Attributes

What surprised many of the mentors was that there appeared to be a big disparity between urban schools and the schools they attended. As well, two students observed huge differences between two city schools in which one mentor was placed. There were differences in the buildings, conditions, students, and student behaviors from one school to the next even though each school was located in the same city. Another student noted that one school in which he was placed was really old and falling down, while equipped with a brand new IMAX and computers.

The discussion evolved to how the condition of the schools affected student behavior and attitudes. Poor environment appeared to some mentors as “spawning” misbehavior among students. Many students in poor school environments were observed to be apathetic and indifferent to school. As well there was a general disrespect for teachers in that students did not appear to care what the teachers said to them. One the other hand, one mentor noted that the teachers she observed had respect for students and that it is important for teachers to show respect. Another mentor noted that there are two types of groups – apathetic and eager to learn.

Regarding apathetic students, a question was raised regarding whether these students could be turned around through writing. Other mentors noted that it depends on the individual; a lot of students kept journals on their own to write about how they feel while others just did the assignments. Several mentors observed that poetry seemed to resonate with students; this genre seemed to inspire motivation and open-mindedness. All mentors agreed that students like writing about themselves and seven mentors agreed that kids like to share their stories with others. One mentor noted that many adolescents shared traumatic experiences. Telling these stories seemed to be cathartic for them.

One mentor shared that he was assigned two of the toughest kids this semester. The goal was to get them to write something. He learned that these kids had potential but needed guidance. He saw positive changes over the semester.
The discussion evolved to the topic of bonding with students. Mentors saw students who would not ordinarily talk with one another sharing their stories. Many observed tears in their students’ eyes as they listened to those stories. One mentor pointed out that students seemed to realize that their lives are not the worst; that they are on the same playing field as everyone else due to similar challenges and issues.

Mentoring Perspectives

The mentors spoke at length about their work and ways to improve the experience. Several mentors agreed that large group mentoring was difficult and largely ineffective. Small group or one-on-one supports are more effective because establishing a rapport with students is the key to helping them.

Each teacher used the mentors differently. As noted above, some required mentors to work with small groups while others assigned them to work with the entire class. Some teachers allowed mentors to choose topics and the students responded well to this. Some teachers had great ideas and lots of different types of writing exercises to motivate students. Some students who were taken out of the room by mentors actually missed the sharing, which is an important part of the program.

The mentors spoke about how the experience changed them in many ways. Several felt great appreciation for the education that they had in comparison to the urban education they observed. The experience was a “big dose of reality” which changes a person’s perspective, according to one mentor. Seeing what inner city kids have to deal with every day was a shock to many. By contrast, some of the students’ experiences brought back memories of the mentors’ adolescent lives, so common themes among them were observed. One mentor shared that these kids appeared to know a lot more for their age and it was proposed that technology advances may contribute to this mature knowledge.

The group offered many recommendations for the future regarding how the mentoring program is organized and conducted which are listed below:

- Better communication between schools/teachers and scheduling. Too often mentors arrived at the school only to be told that the schedule had changed.
- All teachers should give mentors an active role in working with the students. Many teachers did not know what to do with us. There should be a manual that shows teachers how to use mentors from a coordinator’s perspective.
- The program should be consistently implemented throughout all of the schools. Some teachers are so into it (Cantarini) while others are indifferent and apathetic to mentors and the program.
- More mentors would help so that the teacher could divide the class into small groups and everyone could get support.
In summary, the focus group data shared many similarities with the end-of-year survey data in that the mentors spoke about the condition of schools and social/family matters as interfering with the students’ ability to reach their highest potentials. As well, many students appeared to be apathetic and it was speculated that this had a lot to do with the school environment. Students who were less motivated in general seemed to take an interest in writing about themselves. Poetry seemed to motivate many to write. Writing about self appeared to be cathartic for students and many enjoyed sharing their stories with the entire group. The bonding that occurred in the classroom as a result of students sharing their journals with others was inspiring. Several mentors observed tears in student’s eyes as they listened. Students seemed to realize that they share many challenges and issues with their peers.

How the program is implemented in the schools requires additional organization. The mentors noted that many teachers did not seem to know what to do with them when they arrived. Some teachers implemented the program in a creative and energetic way, while others were less enthusiastic. Recommendations centered on giving teachers more guidance with respect to how to use mentors in the classrooms (small and one-on-one assistance is best), and to how to implement the program in consistent ways across schools.

**Discussion**

The research results from this year correlate well with results from the past five years. This fact adds to the credibility of the program and the reliability of its effects on students learning and development. Data collected from this year in the form of pre-post journal entries, end-of-year student surveys, teacher logs, teacher focus group, teacher surveys, mentor surveys and focus group provide a “triangulation” effect that ensures further reliability of the results. Triangulation provides the reader with views of the program’s effects from the perspectives of the students, the teachers, and the mentors. Triangulating data in this way enables the researcher to authenticate common themes emerging from the data as “true” effects of the program. The analysis of data from all three groups reveals that the major themes emerging from the Writers Matter Program are consistent across these groups. The following discussion will *triangulate* major themes emerging from all three groups to demonstrate the impact of the program.

**Writing**

The pre-post data show that writing skills have improved primarily in the focus, content, and organization areas based on an analysis of two treatment groups (students who participated in the program) and one control group (students who did not participate in the program). Moreover, student
surveys concluded that the program assisted them in their writing skill development as a majority of students saw progress in their writing over time. The program was thought to enhance their ability to write more clearly and expressively by a majority of students. Some students noted that the program helped them with grammar skills. Students also identified enhanced confidence in writing, self-knowledge, and stress relief as positive program effects related to writing. The ability to write freely about the challenges and issues facing these students appeared to be motivational and personally uplifting for many participants.

A majority of teachers concluded that the Writing Matters Program enhanced students’ writing skills, but more focused on allowing free expression and providing a motivational tool to get them to write more. Teachers concluded that students were engaged in writing because of this program and made progress in their writing over time. Few details emerged from these data with regard to how much the program fostered enhanced writing skill development such as grammar, syntax, and style except for some references that the program was inspirational and motivating.

The mentors shared their belief that the program assisted students in writing skill development, but focused their attention to its effects on the students’ motivation and ability to freely express their thoughts on paper. Some mentors did note that students made progress on grammar and syntax and ability to formulate ideas in an organized manner.

While there is evidence of improved writing skill development based on data collected on this program, the major benefits focus on an emerging ability to freely express thoughts when writing about personal stories and experiences as well as the ability to write their stories more expressively and clearly. The latter indicates that some positive change in skill development has occurred. Given the personal and focused nature of the writing prompts in this program, it is reasonable to conclude that the PSSA writing rubric categories of focus, content, and organization would naturally be enhanced. This was confirmed in an analysis of the pre- and post-writing journals and comments from teachers that writing skills developed over time. Significant growth in grammar, syntax, and style categories is not evident in the data analysis.

**Personal Development**

There is significant evidence that the program enhances self-awareness and confidence among participation students. Student data in the form of end-of-year surveys revealed a strong sentiment among the majority of participants that the program helped them to know themselves more deeply due to the personal nature of the writing tasks. This personal exploration led many to grow in maturity and to establish future goals. The act of writing forced many to think more deeply about their life experiences and reflect on their options. Numerous students attributed the Writers Matter Program as helping them to establish and achieve personal goals, such as studying harder for tests, completing homework in a timely
fashion, and looking to the future. A strong theme that emerged from these data is that a majority of students indicated that the act of writing helped them to relieve stress and that some used writing as an appropriate coping skill to relieve pent-up anger or self-doubt.

Teacher data confirmed much of what the students’ data showed in that students seemed to gain greater emotional maturity and self-confidence as a result of the program. Some teachers noted that free expression through writing contributed to their personal empowerment. Examples of students who made tremendous gains in their self-discovery and emotional maturity were evident in the data collected. Improved self-confidence spurred several students to engage more in the school community, work harder, and/or take leadership roles for the first time.

Mentor data revealed observations of students who were challenged by many social and family issues to the extent that these circumstances often interfered with the students’ ability to work to their fullest potential in school. Poor school conditions were also thought to mitigate academic progress. Despite these circumstances, however, mentors concluded that progress in writing and in other areas occurred because the program allowed students to open up and freely express their experiences in writing and share journals with each other. The program was also viewed by some of the mentors as inspirational or motivational for students because they were given the freedom to write about what was important to them. As well mentors believed that they influenced students as role models, which helped students to focus on the future and do well in school.

Social Development

One of the most striking results obtained from data analyzed this year and from prior years is how the program appears to bring adolescents together to form a safe, responsive, classroom community. A majority of students shared how the program enhanced their understanding of peers’ life challenges, which led them to change their attitudes towards others. Several students described this phenomenon as to “not judge a book by its cover” or “you can’t judge people by their first appearance.” This enlightened attitude appears to have opened student minds to the positive attributes of difference or diversity. The opportunity to hear peers’ stories occurs in the sharing of journals, which appears to lead to deeper insights regarding fellow students. Quotes taken from student end-of-year surveys allude to the comfort of knowing s/he is not alone in the world.

Teachers expounded on the same observation that students increased their emotional intelligence and maturity. Several teachers noted that the transformation occurred when students learned to be respectful of others’ situations, listen to them, and offer support. Teachers overwhelmingly attributed this growth in their classroom communities, characterized by respect and tolerance, to the Writers Matter Program. Teachers noted that the classroom has become a safe place where students have a voice, a place
where students and teachers learn more about each other, and one that supports each other without judgment. The program also enabled many teachers to get to know their students on personal level, which enhanced their teaching. Students were more motivated to work harder for teachers who show that they care about and know them, according to some participating teachers.

Mentors also observed the social growth of students over time in the Writing Matters Program. Several of the mentors noted that they saw students who would not ordinarily talk to other students sharing their stories with the class. They witnessed students with tears in their eyes as they listened to their peers’ journals. One mentor concluded that their students realized that they shared many, similar life challenges with their peers. This knowledge appeared to be “cathartic” for many students.

**Recommendations**

The following recommendations flow from the data analysis and are organized into several categories listed below:

**Program**
1. Strengthen the writing aspect of the program to include inservice instruction in all writing domains, especially sentence construction, paragraph construction, transitions, style, mechanics, and grammar.
2. Integrate various other subject areas into the scope and sequence of the program (social studies, literature, etc.).

**Teacher Training**
3. Provide teachers with an instructor’s manual that provides a comprehensive scope and sequence of the program, including sample lessons and lesson ideas.
4. Provide teachers with suggestions regarding how to use mentors in their classrooms. If possible increase the number of mentors in each classroom to three or four to ensure that mentors will be working with small groups of students.
5. Provide more support for teachers (perhaps by assigning teacher leaders to assist).
6. Include on the Writers Matter web site a discussion board in which teachers can exchange ideas.

**Data Collection**
7. Teacher logs should be required of all teachers. Bob Vogel or another staff person, who meets regularly with the teachers, collect and review the monthly logs. Regular feedback should be given to teachers to keep them on track with their planning and to anticipate potential “dead times” when teachers’ focus is elsewhere.

8. Target three schools for data collection of pre-and post-student journals. These target schools should have strong teachers, who understand and implements the Writers Matter Program as specified. Each of these teachers should select one class in which the program will not be delivered (just the standard literacy curriculum). This would be the control group. The control group should be similar as possible to the treatment groups (classes that will participate in the program). Characteristics of control/experimental groups should follow these guidelines:
   
   (1) Students in both groups should be in the same grade level.
   
   (2) Classes for both groups should contain, as much as possible, an even distribution of students among demographic categories (gender, race, socio-economic status, etc).
   
   (3) Classes for both groups should be comparable as possible in terms of student ability as measured by standardized tests.
   
   (4) At no time should an “inclusion group” be chosen as a control group, regardless of the other factors above.

9. Continue research on sentence-level analysis of journals.
10. Discontinue end-of-year surveys of students or continue to collect surveys, but not analyze data.
11. Continue with focus group and surveys of teachers.
12. Continue with end-of-year surveys of mentors, but the surveys should be administered in December and April to ensure that more mentors are be included in the data collection. Discontinue mentor focus group sessions.
13. Investigate additional standardized test data to use next year with the help of district people and Professors Liang and Yost.