

# SREB

## GET IT IN WRITING

Making Adolescent  
Writing an Immediate  
Priority in Texas



Southern  
Regional  
Education  
Board

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**GET IT IN WRITING: Making Adolescent Writing an Immediate Priority in Texas**

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The Southern Regional Education Board is a nonprofit and nonpartisan organization based in Atlanta that works with state leaders and educators to improve education. SREB was created in 1948 by Southern governors and legislatures to help leaders in education and government work cooperatively to advance education and improve the social and economic life of the region. In addition to Texas, SREB's 16 member states include Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia. Each is represented by its governor and four gubernatorial appointees.

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# GET IT IN WRITING: Making Adolescent Writing an Immediate Priority in Texas

## ► A Call to Action

According to data collected by the state of Texas and released in 2013, one in every two high school students failed the English I, II and III standardized writing tests. Not as many Texas students in the middle grades failed the writing test, but one in every three did. Only one student in every 20 achieved a score of advanced writer.<sup>1</sup>

Shocking as that may sound, it's nothing new. Middle grades and high school students in Texas (and the nation at large) have made no real gains in writing since the federal government began conducting regular assessments of student achievement in the 1970s.

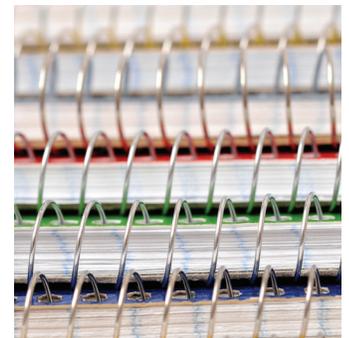
Nor has the poor quality of student writing gone unnoticed. In 1975, for example, the American public was rattled by a *Newsweek* cover story titled "Why Johnny Can't Write," which helped touch off a nationwide crisis of confidence in the schools. "If your children are in high school and planning to attend college," the article warned, "chances are less than even that they will be able to write English at the minimal college level when they get there . . . Willy-nilly, the U.S. educational system is spawning a generation of semiliterates."<sup>2</sup>

But while the poor quality of student writing may be an old story, it has become an even more urgent one. Writing is now an essential skill for college and career success. If students in Texas are to be successful in today's world, they must learn to use writing to summarize, analyze, persuade, inform, explain and entertain. They also must become adept at using writing as a tool for learning and building content knowledge.

This emphasis on writing to learn makes writing instruction a schoolwide responsibility. Writing and reading differ from one discipline to the next. Each discipline employs unique forms of writing, such as an historical argument to advocate for a particular interpretation of events or a scientific log to describe what happened in an experiment and why. If students are to master the distinct forms of writing (and reading) in each discipline, each teacher must teach the writing forms, traditions, tools and standards specific to the subject.<sup>3</sup>

## The impact of the writing problem

Reforms in writing instruction are needed to strengthen the workforce in Texas, more today than ever before. In numerous fields — including industries such as manufacturing and agriculture — the average worker now is expected to manage complex information and communicate effectively with clients and coworkers. Writing, in particular, has come to be regarded as a "threshold skill." According to recent studies, roughly two-thirds of salaried private- and public-sector employees must produce technical reports, memos and other kinds of documents on a regular basis, and employers are becoming increasingly reluctant to hire or promote anyone who cannot write effectively.<sup>3</sup> And in response to a



*Texas needs  
to greatly improve  
students' writing.*



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***For workers, writing is a “threshold skill.”***

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***For citizens, writing is an essential means of personal and social expression.***

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***For students, writing is an essential tool for learning academic content in every subject area.***

***And the more writing instruction students receive, the better they read.***

recent national survey, fully 93 percent of white-collar workers and 80 percent of blue-collar workers said that the ability to write well is important or essential to success in their careers.<sup>4</sup>

This is not to suggest, however, that the value of writing can be measured only in dollars and cents. While writing only recently has come to play such an important role in the workplace, ordinary Americans have long understood the written word, in all of its forms — from diaries, poems, newspaper articles, and letters to the editor to manifestos and declarations of independence — to be an especially powerful means of personal and social expression. As much as reading, speaking and listening (and perhaps even more so in this digital age), writing is an essential tool that allows individuals to participate fully in civic and cultural life.



Additionally, writing is an essential tool for learning academic content — not just in English but in every subject area, including history, science, math, and the career and technical fields. Ample research shows that students are most likely to understand and remember what they read or study in class when they write about it as well, especially if their teachers make “writing to learn” an explicit part of the curriculum.<sup>5</sup> While students can learn by reading without doing any independent writing of their own, that’s a bit like studying the violin by listening to recordings without ever putting bow to strings.

Moreover, writing doesn’t just help students comprehend and remember the material they read and discuss in class; it also helps them become better readers in *general*. As described in the Alliance for Excellent Education’s 2010 report *Writing to Read*, a wealth of evidence shows that “students’ reading abilities are improved by writing about texts they have read; by receiving explicit instruction in spelling, in writing sentences, in writing paragraphs, in text structure, and in the basic processes of composition; and by increasing how much and how frequently they write.”<sup>6</sup> The more one writes, and the more one uses writing as a genuine tool for thinking and communicating, the more likely one learns to approach other people’s texts in the same spirit, understanding that reading their words involves much more than just getting messages out of them. Rather, one learns to see reading as an opportunity to think carefully about what other authors have to say, how they say it and how one might respond.

## The emperor has no prose

Given that writing is such a critical tool for living, learning and earning, one would expect middle grades and high schools to make writing instruction a priority.

Unfortunately, few schools in the United States do so.

Middle grades and high school students are asked to write slightly more today than they did 30 or 40 years ago,<sup>7</sup> but that's not saying much, especially when one considers how much higher the academic expectations are today than they were in past decades.

In response to a survey conducted by Vanderbilt University researchers in 2009, only half of high school English, science and social studies teachers said that they require students to complete at least one significant (multi-paragraph) writing assignment per month.<sup>8</sup> And according to a recent study by the Center on English Learning and Achievement (CELA), using data collected by the U.S. Department of Education, “some 40 percent of twelfth-grade students . . . report never or hardly ever being asked to write a paper of three pages or more.”<sup>9</sup> Instead, much of the writing that they do in school is cursory — for example, they might be asked to complete a worksheet or compose a sentence or two in response to a textbook question.

Further, much of that writing has no intellectual purpose other than to show whether or not they have done their homework or understood what they've been taught. While students are sometimes required to produce extensive pieces of writing (beyond a paragraph), they are not necessarily asked to make and defend an argument or, for that matter, to think for themselves at all. For example, CELA finds that “over 40 percent of the students at Grade 8 and a third at Grade 12 report writing essays requiring analysis or interpretation at most a few times a year.”

But while most students do precious little writing in school, and while much of that writing lacks purpose and depth, that's only part of the problem. At least as troubling is how little writing instruction teachers provide.

It is one thing to assign writing, and it's something else entirely to teach it. While it would be helpful for teachers to require students to write more often, and to write longer and more interesting papers, that would not, in and of itself, help them improve. Students also

need to be shown, explicitly, how to write well. For example, teachers can show them how to summarize ideas; they can show them strategies for planning and organizing their own writing projects; and they can show them how to use connecting words to turn short, choppy sentences into longer and more complex ones.



As described later in this report, researchers have found these and a number of other teaching practices to be effective in helping students make significant improvements in the quality of their writing. Cynics like to say that good writers are born, not made. But the evidence suggests otherwise. Teachers cannot be expected to turn every student into the next Toni Morrison or E.B. White, but they can and should be expected to help every student to produce clear and coherent prose.

Unfortunately, though, while such teaching practices are relatively easy to learn and implement, very few middle grades and high school teachers incorporate them into their regular classroom routines.



Moreover, very few education leaders or policy-makers have made serious efforts to help teachers do so. From time to time, public officials have issued urgent warnings about the need for better writing instruction, and from time to time, blue-ribbon panels have recommended new investments and initiatives in this area. However, for all the hundreds of millions of dollars that the federal government has devoted to reading instruction — through programs such as Reading First and Striving Readers — it has

never provided more than token funding for programs that address the teaching of writing. And while Texas and other states have spent decades trying to improve their schools' capacity to teach reading, especially in the early grades, **very few have launched and sustained major initiatives to improve writing instruction.**<sup>10</sup>

This must change.

Districts, schools and teachers in Texas and all states, in all disciplines, need to make a concerted and sustained effort to help students acquire the writing skills needed to use writing effectively in each subject area so that they become college- and career-ready.

## No higher priority: improve writing instruction

Given how little writing goes on in most middle grades and high school classes and given how little writing instruction most teachers provide, it should come as no surprise to state leaders to learn that, for example:

- The quality of the nation's middle grades and high school students' writing hasn't improved since the 1970s.
- Half of today's high school graduates are unable to write at a college level.<sup>11</sup>
- Seven in 10 employers describe those graduates as "deficient" in writing skills.<sup>12</sup>
- American corporations are forced to spend roughly \$3 billion per year to help workers improve their writing.<sup>13</sup>

In the 2009 report *A Critical Mission: Making Adolescent Reading an Immediate Priority in SREB States*, an SREB committee urged the 16 member states to redouble their efforts to provide effective, research-based *reading* instruction in the secondary schools. Many middle grades and high school students still need help reading fluently, developing their vocabularies and understanding what they read, but all students must be taught how to read and comprehend the kinds of advanced materials they encounter in their subject-area classes. Reading isn't just a mechanical skill to be taught by reading specialists. At the same time, every subject requires its own *kinds* of high-level reading, and every teacher — whether in science, history, English or any other part of the school — has a responsibility to help students become skilled readers in the given field.

This report adds a second and equally important dimension to these earlier recommendations: In order to become productive learners, workers and citizens, young people in Texas must learn not just to read at an advanced level, in all subject areas, but also to *write* effectively. And in order to make that possible, many more teachers must be given the training, support and resources they need to provide high-quality writing instruction. This is absolutely essential if Texas is to improve students' achievement and readiness.



## ► Writing Instruction: The New Agenda



***Literacy instruction remains critical in the upper grades.***

Through programs such as Title I, Head Start and Reading First, federal and state policy-makers have directed hundreds of millions of dollars, since the 1970s, to research, teacher training and classroom materials designed to improve the quality of literacy instruction (particularly, *reading* instruction) in kindergarten through third grade. Until quite recently, though, those same policy-makers all but ignored grades four to 12, hoping that once students master the basics, they will continue to make progress all on their own — their reading and writing automatically becoming more advanced the more of it they do.

Fortunately, a growing numbers of policy-makers and school leaders are starting to recognize just how misguided an assumption that is. In truth, literacy instruction remains critical in the upper grades, not just for those who struggle to decode and read texts fluently but for *all* students, including those who have mastered the basics.

No matter how well students pick up the elementary mechanics of reading and writing, they cannot be expected to proceed on autopilot through high school and beyond. Very few students teach themselves how to analyze, discuss and write high-level academic texts. Even the brightest and most accomplished tend to rely on their teachers, parents and other adults to *show* them, explicitly, the ways in which educated people make and defend arguments, interpret novels, analyze historical documents, write lab reports, compose job letters, and so on.

Over the last several years, school reformers and policy groups have begun to make up for their longstanding neglect of literacy instruction in grades four to 12. In particular, they have called attention to and created resources for the millions of middle grades and high school students who read far below grade level. Adolescent reading instruction has been given top billing in major reports from the Alliance for Excellent Education, the National Association of Secondary School Principals and a number of other prominent organizations.

Groups such as SREB and the Carnegie Corporation have put it at the top of the state policy agenda. And various states (including SREB members such as Texas and Florida) have created well-regarded, large-scale initiatives to improve middle grades and high school reading instruction. Educational publishers have rushed to produce age-appropriate books and other materials for teenagers who struggle with grade-level texts. And the federal government has joined the cause by expanding its Striving Readers program<sup>14</sup> and promising to include all grade levels in new funding streams for reading instruction and research.

But while efforts to improve reading instruction have received the most headlines over the last few years, interest in writing instruction has begun to pick up as well.

For example, the Alliance for Excellent Education followed up its landmark 2004 report *Reading Next* (which reviewed the existing research on effective reading instruction in grades four through 12) with *Writing Next*, published in 2007. From 2003 to 2008, the College Board sponsored a National Writing Commission, a blue-ribbon group that called attention to public schools' neglect of one of the fabled "three Rs" (reading, writing and arithmetic). Writing components have been added to the SAT and ACT college entrance exams, in response to higher education's growing concern about the quality of student writing. And groups as varied as ACT, the National Association of Manufacturers, and the Association of American Colleges and Universities have issued sobering reports on the

need for more — and more — effective writing instruction in the secondary schools and at the college level.<sup>15</sup>

Further, and consistent with what researchers have argued for many years, reading and writing (along with speaking and listening) are complementary and overlapping activities. Teaching one without the other makes about as much sense as showing a novice tennis player how to hit forehand but not backhand.

In short, the time has come for the secondary schools to make writing and writing instruction an explicit goal — spelled out plainly in state guidelines for teaching, learning, testing, teacher certification and professional development. Teachers need to help their students become skilled writers *and* readers. As much as they have done over the past several years to strengthen the teaching of reading, policy-makers, schools and teachers in Texas now must work every bit as hard to ratchet up both the quantity and quality of writing instruction in the middle grades and high school.

## Challenges

Many times already, over many decades and from many sources, policy-makers have heard the bad news that writing is being neglected in our schools. And while researchers have identified a number of ways to teach writing effectively, these methods are rarely applied in the classroom.

However, those sources haven't been clear or candid enough in describing just how challenging it will be to *implement* any of those teaching strategies or curricular guidelines on a large scale. The challenges are considerable, though, and state education leaders, schools and teachers in Texas will have to confront them head on before they can make any real progress in this area.

### ***1) There is great confusion as to whose responsibility it is to teach which kinds of writing.***

The general public might assume that writing instruction is the sole responsibility of the English department. Among secondary educators themselves, however, it never has been entirely clear which sorts of writing the English department ought to teach, and whether the writing skills that students learn in English are transferable to social studies, chemistry and other subject areas, or to life outside of school.

According to recent survey data,<sup>16</sup> middle grades and high school English teachers do tend to see writing instruction as one of their core responsibilities (along with the teaching of literature), but they understand that responsibility to be limited to teaching students to analyze and respond to literature, teaching them to express themselves personally, and — to some extent — teaching them to write persuasive essays and research papers. By and large, they do not define it as their job to teach other, subject-specific kinds of writing (such as lab reports, historical essays and technical materials). Meanwhile, teachers from other academic departments tend to agree that they, and not the English department, should teach the kinds of writing that are specific to their fields — but those teachers do not necessarily define writing instruction as a pressing responsibility that absolutely must be incorporated into their work. (Although, when put together, the science, social studies and math departments assign students to do more writing than is assigned by English teachers alone).<sup>17</sup>

In addition, since the 1970s, a grass-roots movement known as Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) has been active in much of the country. Supporters have had occasional



success in creating schoolwide tutoring centers, persuading individual content-area teachers to give priority to writing instruction, and helping them learn how to do so effectively. Although some WAC programs continue to thrive, the movement has been most active at the college level, and it has never grown beyond a small minority of middle grades and high schools.

The need to clarify responsibility continues. Although students may sometimes use similar writing strategies in subjects such as science and history, they often use these strategies in different ways and for different purposes.<sup>18</sup> Persuasive reports in science and social studies differ in the types of claims that are made, what counts as evidence, and how this evidence is evaluated. A science teacher is much more qualified than an English or history teacher to teach students how to think and write like a scientist, just as a history teacher is better prepared to teach students to think and write like historians.

### ***2) Few secondary school teachers or administrators know how to teach writing effectively.***

Some prospective high school and middle grades school teachers may take a single course that gives them a brief introduction to the teaching of reading and writing in their given content areas. Other new teachers are not required to know anything about writing instruction at all, as they receive no courses that address how to teach this critical but difficult skill.

Not surprisingly, then, most middle grades and high school English, science, social studies and math teachers say that their teacher education programs did not adequately prepare them to teach writing. In fact, in response to a recent national survey of high school teachers, nearly half of respondents said that they had received *minimal to no* training in writing instruction, whether in college, graduate school or in-service programs.<sup>19</sup>

Nor, for that matter, is there any reason to assume that school administrators are any more knowledgeable about the teaching of writing than are the teachers they supervise. However, their support will be critical to the success of any schoolwide effort to improve writing instruction. For example, students' writing skills will need to be assessed, teaching responsibilities will have to be redefined, professional development will have to be arranged, master schedules may have to be rethought, and so on — all of which will likely require administrators to make serious investments of time, effort and resources. In the past, relatively few principals have demonstrated that kind of broad commitment to effective writing instruction. If they do choose to do so, many will no doubt face a steep learning curve.

### ***3) Teachers aren't necessarily skilled writers.***

In recent years, much concern has been voiced over the problem of “out-of-field teaching” in the nation's secondary schools. As many as 17 percent of English, history, science and math classes are taught by individuals who have little or no academic training in the given subject area (and in schools enrolling high numbers of minority students or those from low-income households, the figure rises to more than 30 percent).<sup>20</sup>

How can teachers provide effective instruction, school reformers ask, if they do not know the content they are supposed to teach? If they are not sure how to solve quadratic equations, for example, then how can they help students learn algebra? And if they've never read the Declaration of Independence, then how well can they teach U.S. history?

Such questions can just as easily be asked about teachers' experience as writers. If teachers (of English, history or any other subject) cannot themselves write with confidence and skill, or if they have not written much since college, then how can they teach writing



***All teachers should teach the writing forms, traditions, tools and standards specific to their subjects.***

effectively? How can they put themselves in the shoes of a student who suffers from writer's block, for example, if they cannot even remember the last time they experienced it? If they are not themselves practicing writers, then what sort of advice can they give students on planning, organizing and revising their papers? In short, while it will be critical for teachers to become knowledgeable about writing instruction, their effectiveness in the classroom may also depend on their capacity and willingness to practice the very same kinds of writing that they teach.

That greatly complicates the work of improving teacher education and professional development programs. If it could be assumed that all teachers were skilled and frequent writers, then teacher educators might be able to devote all of their time and attention to demonstrating effective approaches to writing instruction. But if teachers themselves need to strengthen their writing, then professional development becomes a much more challenging task.

Moreover, this suggests that improving writing instruction in the secondary schools will depend upon the writing instruction that goes on at the *postsecondary* level, where the next generation of teachers will be educated.

Unfortunately, according to a recent analysis of transcripts and survey data from thousands of undergraduates, the nation's colleges have not taken writing instruction much more seriously than have the middle grades and high schools. Even accounting for the first-year writing courses that are required on most campuses, only half of college sophomores report that they have been assigned to write more than 20 pages for any class (much less that their professors provided explicit writing *instruction*).<sup>21</sup>

#### ***4) Writing instruction can be quite time- and labor-intensive.***

In order to become skilled writers, students require effective writing instruction, but they also require a great deal of practice. "A good rule of thumb," argues researcher Steve Graham, "is that students should spend at least one hour or more each day in the process of writing — planning, revising, authoring or publishing text. This includes writing projects that go beyond a single paragraph or day-to-day projects that may take weeks or even months to complete."<sup>23</sup>

Given how little writing instruction now goes on in secondary schools, that would entail a dramatic change from the status quo.

Moreover, the greater the number of pages students write, and the greater the number of drafts they complete, the greater the demands on teachers' time both in and outside of the classroom. To some extent, the burden can be eased by asking students to read and comment on each other's work (some research shows such feedback is effective<sup>24</sup>), rather than expecting teachers to read and respond to everything. Further, many pieces of writing (such as in-class writing that students do to prepare for discussion, or to reflect on what they have read) do not require feedback or revision and need not be handed in to the teacher for comments or a grade. Students also can be taught how to evaluate their own writing to improve it.<sup>25</sup>

Inevitably, though, when teachers assign major writing projects, involving multiple drafts, they face an extremely heavy workload. It can take several hours to read, say, a collection of five-page essays produced by a single class of 20 or more students, and most teachers are responsible for four or five classes. Further, it can take many more hours to comment on and grade that work, or to provide guidance on how to revise it.

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***If teachers cannot themselves write with confidence and skill, how can they teach writing effectively?***

## ► Resources for Improving Secondary Writing Instruction

Education leaders should not underestimate how difficult it will be to improve reading and writing instruction in the middle grades and high schools. As described above, that work will require expertise that few teachers now have and resources that few states can easily locate.

Still, as daunting as those challenges may be, they must be overcome. Given the central role that written communication plays in contemporary life, education reformers simply cannot afford to raise their hands in surrender. Unless they learn how to read and write with confidence and skill, young people in Texas will stand little chance of succeeding in school, college or the workforce.

For all of the obstacles at hand, policy-makers have some good reasons to take heart:

### ***1) The content areas have begun to accept responsibility for literacy instruction.***

As established earlier in this report, it has been unclear whose responsibility it should be to teach reading and writing at the secondary level. All teachers tend to assume that it is the English department's job, while English teachers tend to focus their efforts on literature instruction.

Within the academic content areas, though, there now seems to be growing awareness that reading and writing are integral to every subject area, and that every department can and should teach its own forms of communication. In 2006, for example, the International Reading Association collaborated with the professional associations representing English, science, math and social studies teachers to publish a joint set of Literacy Coaching Standards, descriptions of what one should know in order to take on the job of providing other teachers with guidance on reading and writing instruction.<sup>26</sup>

That publication was unprecedented in two ways: Not only did it provide a formal acknowledgment that the content areas ought to share responsibility for literacy instruction, but, just as important, it acknowledged that each content area has its own ways of defining what it means to be a good reader or writer. A well-written and well-argued history paper, for example, is very different from a well-written lab report or well-argued mathematical proof, and there's no reason to assume that English teachers know much, if anything, about the standards for acceptable style, formatting and reasoning in those non-literary genres.

### ***2) A number of specific teaching practices are known to be effective.***

In their 2007 report *Writing Next*, researchers Steve Graham and Dolores Perin summarize their exhaustive statistical analysis of the existing research on writing instruction in grades four through 12 (the first such analysis in 20 years).<sup>27</sup>

As they acknowledge, the scientific knowledge base on writing instruction is dwarfed by the amount of research that has been devoted, over the last several decades, to the teaching of reading (particularly, the teaching of basic reading skills to young children). But even so, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that at least 11 different teaching practices are effective at the secondary level and lead to significant gains in the quality of student writing.

In short, policy-makers and schools can be confident that if teachers (in any and all subject areas) faithfully implement the strategies described in *Writing Next*, student writing will improve.

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***There now seems to be growing awareness that reading and writing are integral to every subject area.***

Moreover, while not every teacher can or should become a literacy specialist, there is no reason states can't require English, history, science and other teachers to study at least the basics of effective writing instruction. Most of these teaching strategies are relatively straightforward, and they easily can be incorporated into existing pre-service teacher education and in-service professional development programs for teachers in the academic content areas.

### ***3) Every state already has valuable resources and expertise in writing instruction.***

If state policy-makers take a close look at their local school districts and universities, they will discover that they already have on hand many committed, experienced and knowledgeable writing instructors.

For example, an organization called the National Writing Project (NWP) offers intensive summer programs and ongoing workshops for teachers interested in writing and writing instruction. Since the 1970s, it has steadily grown from a single site to a federally supported network of some 200 local projects (at least one in every state), serving thousands of teachers every year.

In the past, the NWP was sometimes criticized for promoting a narrow approach to writing instruction (focusing solely on the “process” of writing and withholding the sorts of explicit, skills-based instruction that research has shown to help weaker writers, in particular<sup>28</sup>). Today, though, the NWP is generally viewed as a pragmatic, mainstream organization that promotes a range of teaching practices supported by the best available research<sup>29</sup>, and members will be important allies of any statewide writing initiative. Moreover, the organization has already developed precisely the kind of professional network that could support a state-sponsored professional development program. And because NWP sites are located on college campuses and directed by college faculty, they already have strong connections to university-based writing centers and associated experts in writing instruction.

Likewise, Texas and a number of other SREB states — including Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, Mississippi and Virginia — recently have invested in large-scale literacy initiatives. In fact, the Alabama Reading Initiative and Just Read, Florida! have come to be viewed as national models in this area. Both offer extensive professional development programs for teachers, along with technical assistance to schools and districts, statewide guidance on testing and assessment, efforts to coordinate among university-based teacher

education programs, and resources for parents, students and community literacy organizations.

To date, these initiatives have emphasized reading instruction in the early grades, but there is no reason they cannot be expanded to address secondary reading and writing instruction as well.



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***Initiatives that have emphasized writing instruction can be expanded to address writing as well.***



**4) In the Internet age, students are writing more — and with more enthusiasm — than ever before.**

Ever since personal computers first became commercially available, in the 1970s, researchers have been asking what effect digital technologies might have on students' writing. When students use word processors, for example, do they produce longer essays than when they write by hand? Do they revise their papers more thoroughly, and does the quality of their writing improve? Or could technology have a negative effect on literate culture? For example, are text messaging, blogging and other kinds of electronic communication training kids to write shallow, sloppy prose?

As described in *Writing Next* and elsewhere, researchers have found that using word processors has a moderately positive effect on the quality of student writing (and a quite large effect for weaker writers when word processors are used in combination with software designed to help writers plan, organize, and revise their work).<sup>30</sup> Where schools have not yet created computer labs or other means for students to write with electronic resources, they would be well-advised to do so, and they can expect student writing to improve slightly as a result.

However, the bigger lesson to be drawn from the research is that the technology itself is less important than how people use it. As with every other means of communication (from stone tablets to paper and pencils to the telephone), electronic tools such as computers, the Internet and mobile phones lend themselves to highly sophisticated exchanges of ideas and information, and they also lend themselves to the sharing of nonsense. As a recent review of the research in this area concluded, if the question is whether technology helps or hinders student writing, then the best answer is: "It depends."<sup>31</sup>

Today, young people spend a lot of time writing and sending each other half-thought-out text messages, but they're also using technology to create thriving online communities, where they write back and forth, often at length, about topics they care about — anything from politics to celebrity hairstyles to strategies for winning the latest online game. Their writing isn't always sophisticated, and the topics are sometimes banal, but the fact is that adolescents are writing more now than ever before, especially outside of school, and educators may be able to tap into that enthusiasm.



## Eleven Elements of Effective Adolescent Writing Instruction

The report *Writing Next* identified 11 teaching practices and strategies that have been shown, through rigorous studies, to have significant and positive effects on the quality of students' writing.

1. **Writing Strategies**, which involve teaching students strategies for planning, revising and editing their compositions
2. **Summarization**, which involves explicitly and systematically teaching students how to summarize texts
3. **Collaborative Writing**, which uses instructional arrangements in which adolescents work together to plan, draft, revise and edit their compositions
4. **Specific Product Goals**, which assign students specific, reachable goals for the writing they are to complete
5. **Word Processing**, which uses computers and word processors as instructional supports for writing assignments
6. **Sentence Combining**, which involves teaching students to construct more complex, sophisticated sentences
7. **Prewriting**, which engages students in activities designed to help them generate or organize ideas for their compositions
8. **Inquiry Activities**, which engage students in analyzing immediate, concrete data to help them develop ideas and content for a particular writing task
9. **Process Writing Approach**, which interweaves a number of writing instructional activities in a workshop environment that stresses extended writing opportunities, writing for authentic audiences, personalized instruction, and cycles of writing
10. **Study of Models**, which provides students with opportunities to read, analyze and emulate models of good writing
11. **Writing for Content Learning**, which uses writing as a tool for learning content material

*Source: Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools, a report to Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2007 — [www.all4ed.org/files/WritingNext.pdf](http://www.all4ed.org/files/WritingNext.pdf).*

## ► Recommendations

Even in the best of times, state policy-makers tend to be wary of establishing initiatives with limited resources. How can states such as Texas balance the critical need to improve student writing with the equally critical demands of the cost to do so?

The following recommendations offer a number of long-term priorities for state legislators, school leaders, board of education members and schools to consider; some low-cost, short-term ideas to pursue in the meantime; and some words of caution:

### *1) Long-range strategies*

**Ensure that state academic standards assign clear, coherent and realistic responsibilities for writing instruction in each subject area.** Not only should students be expected to become skilled writers in general, but they should also become skilled at the kinds of writing used in specific subject areas, such as history, biology and English. Further, state standards should make clear that writing is a critical tool for learning any kind of material, and students should be asked to write often in all of their subject-area classes.

**Use available policy levers to encourage teachers in every subject area to take responsibility for writing instruction.**

- The most powerful source of leverage is likely to be the state accountability system. Including academic writing standards in history, science and other content areas increases the likelihood that writing is part of every subject in secondary schools. **Making sure that those subject specific writing standards are reflected in state achievement tests strengthens this outcome, too.**
- **Require that pre-service teacher education programs include significant amounts of course work devoted to writing instruction in the content areas.** Given the urgent priority to improve secondary reading and writing instruction (both in general and in the content areas), teachers need adequate preparation from their college teacher education programs.
- When content-area standards include attention to writing, and when students need to write well in order to get good scores on state tests, then teachers have strong incentives to provide effective writing instruction. In order to avoid any ambiguity, though, it is useful to **require all secondary content-area teachers to devote a specific number of classroom hours, at minimum, to writing instruction every year.**

**Improve the quality of writing assessments.** Writing assessments provide policy-makers, schools and teachers with valuable information for improving students' writing. Assessment provides needed information for monitoring students' writing progress, designing writing instruction, and modifying such instruction if it is not effective. Policy-makers, schools and teachers must make tough choices about the shape of their writing assessments to ensure that they are useful. Most important:

- **Ensure that state achievement tests require students to compose extended written answers** in response to intellectually complex texts and prompts.
- **Ensure that those assigned to evaluate student writing fully understand the state standards,** use a common scoring rubric, and receive training that enables them to produce highly consistent ratings of written work.

- **Go beyond state writing assessments** by encouraging teachers to use classroom-based writing assessments to monitor student progress more frequently, allowing them to adjust their instruction as needed to make it more effective.

**Align instructional materials with state standards for writing instruction.** Require publishers to include more and higher-quality writing assignments in their textbooks and materials for courses in every subject area.

**Create standards and accountability mechanisms for those who provide professional development in writing instruction.** Unfortunately, while it is widely believed that professional development is an essential ingredient of successful school reform, few states have taken steps to ensure the quality and consistency of local professional development programs. (For one example of how such standards and oversight might be designed, policy-makers can look to the National Writing Project, which conducts frequent and ongoing reviews of the services provided by its local affiliates, and which does not hesitate to close down underperforming programs.)

**Consider building a statewide professional development program.** For practical advice, policy-makers in Texas might look to home-grown programs such as the Texas Adolescent Literacy Academies or programs from other states such as Just Read, Florida! and the California Writing Project — as well as the Alabama Reading Initiative, which began as a public-private partnership with major funding by the state’s business community.

**Give school and district leaders the flexibility they need to improve reading and writing instruction.** In order to make it possible for teachers to provide high-quality, reading- and writing-intensive classes, it may be necessary to rethink master schedules, credit requirements and staffing policies — and perhaps to renegotiate collective bargaining agreements. School principals and district administrators may have promising reform ideas that cannot succeed unless they have the authority to rearrange individual teachers’ course loads, class sizes, and schedules (for example, allowing them to teach fewer classroom hours in exchange for spending more time helping students individually with their writing).

## *2) Short-term recommendations*

**Publicize state and district policies and student performance in this area.** The Texas Education Agency should research, document and publicize local achievement trends, academic standards, assessment systems, teacher certification requirements, and past and present reform initiatives relevant to middle grades and high school writing.

**Identify local resources.** Policy-makers and school districts should also assign staff to take stock of local resources for secondary writing instruction, including teachers, literacy coaches, administrators, and college and university faculty who have expertise in this area, as well as relevant professional development programs, school and college writing centers (or chapters of the National Writing Project), community-based tutoring programs that focus on student writing, and regional foundations and business-education partnerships that have demonstrated an interest in writing instruction.

**Strategize.** Create a committee or working group to decide where writing instruction and achievement should fit into the state’s priorities for secondary school reform. Participants should define long-term goals, debate policy options and design realistic plans for improving instruction.

**Build off of existing district- and state-level reform initiatives that focus on reading instruction.** While Texas' statewide projects such as the Texas Adolescent Literacy Academies focused mainly on the teaching of reading, they could be expanded to focus on writing as well.

**Cultivate local champions for writing instruction.** Given the growing importance of written communication to civic and economic life, directors of private and corporate foundations may be willing allies in district and state reform efforts.

**Convene a state summit on writing instruction,** using it as an opportunity to raise awareness of the urgent need for reform and to launch any new initiatives or efforts in this area.

**Look for every opportunity to call attention to the urgent need to improve writing instruction** in the middle grades and high school. For example, state legislators, the governor and other education leaders should raise the issue during media interviews, weave the topic into stump speeches, and address it in opinion pieces and commentaries.

### *3) A few words of caution*

**Take care in deciding which stakeholders to include (or not include) in any statewide writing initiative.** Numerous stakeholders have legitimate interests in writing instruction, everybody from teachers, administrators, and district and state policy-makers to parents, librarians, business leaders, teacher unions, researchers, college and university officials, and community leaders. Excluding any one of those parties can undermine reforms over the long term. Then again, it is important to limit the size of any committee or working group, as too many participants may slow progress.

**Practice due diligence before investing in unproven interventions, textbooks or approaches to writing instruction.** It may be tempting to look for a quick and easy way to boost students' reading and writing skills, but policy-makers and school officials should not be fooled into believing that some flashy new software or textbook series will make all the difference. Teaching materials do matter, but so, too, do academic standards and accountability systems, curriculum, teacher education, professional development, and more.

**Share ownership of any statewide effort to improve writing instruction.** To succeed over the long term, statewide writing initiatives should not be affiliated with a particular administration or political party. For example, the Alabama Reading Initiative and Just Read, Florida! have thrived and endured largely because they have been defined as independent, nonpartisan entities, set up to outlive any given election cycle.

**Acknowledge that difficult trade-offs will have to be made.** Historically, policy-makers have found it much easier to add things to the secondary school curriculum (from driver's education to community service requirements, courses on personal finance, and so on) than to take things away. Effective reading and writing instruction takes significant amounts of time and effort, however. It cannot just be tacked on to the end of the curriculum. If they mean to make real improvements in this area, state leaders will have to acknowledge precisely how *big* of a priority it is, and they may have to make tough calls as to which resources will have to be cut in order to make room for it.

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