# MARCH & APRIL 2016

# SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT BOOSTER
## *Writing*

Have you heard that old saying that what gets measured gets done? In Iowa we are required to measure reading, math, and science and as a result, in many schools, those disciplines get the lion's share of attention. Administrators and teachers alike know if schools relax in those areas, it will be widely reported and district officials will most likely hear from concerned parents, business leaders, and even state level officials.

Though the stakes are high for schools in the content areas reported and no one wants to be on "the list," the stakes are at least as high for our students who have limited writing skills, a content area that is NOT required to be assessed in Iowa. Students with underdeveloped writing skills will not only have trouble mastering writing assignments in higher education, but also struggle to gar- ner well-paying jobs, both white and blue collar, and may never be promoted should they be hired. Writing is critical to success in college and careers, and it is up to all of us to make sure students leave school with well-developed writing skills.

Focusing on writing isn't just about future academic and employment success, though those two issues have huge life impacts. When students write, they improve reading comprehension and learning in general. Educator Doug Reeves emphasizes,

> "Nonfiction writing develops the ability to think logically and precisely. Assessment on a monthly basis and going back to revise and edit their work based on that feedback hones students' critical thinking skills."

Reeves identified and studied 90/90/90 schools, schools with 90% poverty, 90% diversity, and at least 90% proficiency on the state academic reading assessment. One of the common elements in these schools was a focus on nonfiction writing. Dr, Reeves notes, "Techniques used by the 90/90/90 Schools are consistent. These schools are not lurching from one fad to another. While they differ in some respects with regard to implementation, they are consistent with regard to the following areas of emphasis:

- "Writing – students write frequently in a variety of subject.
- "Performance Assessment – the predominant method of assessment is performance assess- ment. This does not mean that these schools never use multiple-choice items. However, it is performance assessment in several different disciplines that local observers have associated with student progress.
- "Collaboration – teachers routinely collaborate, using real student work as the focus of their discussion.
- "Focus – teachers in these schools do not try to "do it all" but are highly focused on learning."

The Carnegie Corporation and Alliance for Excellent Education released Writing to Read, which offers information about the link between writing and reading.

1. "Students' comprehension of science, social studies, and language arts texts is improved when they write about what they read, specifically when they
    •Respond to a text in writing,
    •Write summaries of a text,
    •Write notes about a text,
    •Answer questions about a text in writing, or
    •Create and answer written questions about a text."
2. "Students' reading skills and comprehension are improved by learning the skills and processes that go into creating text, specifically when teachers
    •Teach the process of writing,
    •Integrate text structures for writing,
    •Teach paragraph or sentence construction skills,
    •Teach spelling and sentence construction skills, and
    •Teach spelling skills."
3. "Students' reading comprehension is improved by having them increase how often they produce their own texts."

Knowing this relationship, those vested in the success of students can confidently advocate for more time spent on writing, whether we assess it or not, expecting the very increase in reading comprehension our systems have been striving to deliver.

# Is Writing Important to Our Children's Futures?

## *National Comission on Writing Report*

Sixty-four members of the Business Roundtable, a group of the nation's leading executives, were surveyed in 2004. They noted that businesses end up spending billions every year to improve their employees' writing skills. They concluded, "While trying to improve math, science and technology in our schools, we've neglected writing…Writing is a fundamental professional skill. Most of the new jobs in the years ahead will emphasize writing." They further noted writing is important for both salaried and hourly employees.

Among the survey findings:

   •"Writing is a 'threshold skill' for both employment and promotion, particularly for salaried employees. Half the responding companies report that they take writing into consideration when hiring professional employees. 'In most cases, writing ability could be your ticket in . . . or it could be your ticket out, said one respondent."
   •"People who cannot write and communicate clearly will not be hired and are unlikely to last long enough to be considered for promotion. 'Poorly written application materials would be extremely prejudicial,' said one respondent. 'Such applicants would not be considered for any position."
   •"Two-thirds of salaried employees in large American companies have some writing responsibility. 'All employees must have writing ability . . . Manufacturing documentation, operating procedures, reporting problems, lab safety, waste-disposal operations—all have to be crystal clear,' said one human resource director."
   •"Eighty percent or more of the companies in the service and finance, insurance, and real estate (FIRE) sectors, the corporations with the greatest employment- growth potential, assess writing during hiring. 'Applicants who provide poorly written letters wouldn't likely get an interview,' commented one insurance executive."
   •"A similar dynamic is at work during promotions. Half of all companies take writing into account when making promotion decisions. One succinct comment: 'You can't move up without writing skills."
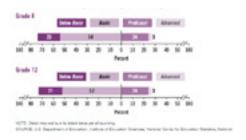
# How are Students Performing in Writing?

## *The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)*

As you probably know, NAEP is our "national report card," showing how each state stacks up against others. A sample of students from all states take the assessment and an extrapolation from that sample provides a general idea of how students are performing in various content areas by state. In the 2007 NAEP, 31% of Iowa students were proficient in writing and 1% were advanced, leaving 68% of students below proficient. Since we don't assess writing in Iowa at the state level, and as a result often do not address it in a significant way at the local level, there is no reason to believe Iowa is much different than it was in 2007. Indeed, four years later, in 2011, the NAEP included a writing assessment that had just been rewritten, and because of that, state specific results won't be available until the next NAEP writing exam in 2017. However, the national results of the 2011 NAEP writing exam are compiled in the graphic below and show that the trends have not changed. On this assessment, only 3% of students nationally were advanced and just 24% of students were proficient. That leaves over 70% of students at both grade levels struggling in writing.



## *ACT*

ACT offers a writing task in which over half of students participate. Students are asked to, "…develop an argument that puts their own perspective in dialogue with others," in response to a contemporary issue. The Washington Post has an article about this new test and provided both anecdotal evidence and information from ACT that noted students are scoring lower on the writing test than on any of the other ACT subject area tests. This statistic is not surprising, since writing may be left to the wayside in favor of instruction in other, seemingly more pressing, and measured, priority areas.

# Curriculum and Instruction

## *Curriculum*

### *Core Curriculum Standards in Writing*

The Iowa Core Curriculum sets out ambitious standards in writing, shown below, as well as grade level expectations necessary to fulfill these overarching standards. Is your school district providing instruction in each of these standards? Are you assessing each one to determine student performance? Do you have remediation plans for supporting struggling writers in your school district?

Text Types and Purposes

    1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
    2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
    3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

<u>Production and Distribution of Writing</u>
    4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
    5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.
    6. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.
<u>Research to Build and Present Knowledge</u>
    7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
    8. Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.
    9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
<u>Range of Writing</u>
    10. Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

***Business2Community: A view from outside of the education community***
Business2Community (B2C) identifies trends in writing that employees will need to demonstrate as they move into the business world. The overarching idea is a trend toward simplicity – writing that is engaging, integrates supplementary graphics, and uses concise prose.

- Clear, concise, and simple prose
- Writing skills will not include only prose, but will include infographics
- Grammar, spelling, and punctuation will not be thrown out
- Prose writing will have to be broken up (we have shorter attention spans)
- Writer will have to know the audience and adjust they style and vocabulary accordingly
- Creativity is important – your message has to engage your readers
- You'll have to be able to write interesting and engaging blogs and articles
- Write for social media – short, attention grabbing facts, great stories
- Writing as video

# *Instruction*

### *What Works Clearinghouse*
The What Works Clearinghouse developed a practice guide for teaching writing to elementary students in June of 2012. This guide offers several recommendations:

- Provide daily time for students to write.
- Teach students to use the writing process for a variety of purposes.
- Teach students to become fluent with handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, typing, and word processing.
- Create an engaged community of writers.

### *Writing Next*
Writing Next lists many of the same strategies noted earlier, for adolescent writing:
    1. Writing Strategies, which involves 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 assigns 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 composition
    8. Inquiry Activities, which engages 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

Johns Hopkins University provides research related to the teaching of writing in, "Evidence-based practices for teaching writing." When implemented consistently, these strategies all have effect sizes large enough to make a significant difference in student performance. These actions can be easily summarized into model, model, model. If your students begin writing just as you have modeled, don't be worried. With your help and encouragement they will soon find their own voice.

•Teacher models writing strategies for planning, revising, and editing.
•Students are taught explicit strategies for summarizing text and then students write summaries of texts.
•With clear structures and explicit expectations for working together, students are permitted to write collaboratively with peers.
•Detailed goals for student writing are established (for instance at least three supporting ideas for a stated belief in an opinion essay).
•Students use word processing for writing (it is so much easier to edit work on a computer).
•Students are explicitly taught through modeling how to combine sentences and make them more complex and interesting.
•The process writing approach is used. These classroom routines for planning, revising, and reviewing allow extended opportunities for students to write and helpful structures to keep them going.
•Students participate in inquiry activities for writing. This means students do things like set goals for their writing, observe experiments or behavior and then write what they observe, and other authentic writing activities.
•Involve students in prewriting activities. These activities could involve research, accessing what they know, organizing their thinking, etc.
•Providing models of good writing. These models can come from the teacher writing and sharing their thinking processes as they publicly compose. Another example is the study of excellent examples of writing genres and discussion of how authors develop their ideas.

### Everybody Writes

Donald Graves is considered to be the father of the process writing approach. This article by Professor Graves offers exceptional advice related to setting up a classroom where writing is part of the routine. Read the article to find more.

# Questions for Your Leadership Team

Here are some questions you and your leadership team might consider as you discuss the study of writing in your school district. As is always the case, it's helpful to collect data about student performance. Equally important is the collection of data about what's going on in your school related to the practice you're studying - in this case, writing.You may not have any data to answer all of these questions - understandable given the enormity of what goes on in schools today. But given what you know about writing – how significantly it impacts students' futures and influences reading – isn't it time to start collecting some data about writing achievement and writing instructional practices in your district? Here are a few ideas to get your started on gathering data.

Look at agendas and meeting notes from collaborative teams and professional learning sessions. Lesson logs provide an abundance of information. Surveys, confirmed by walk-throughs, are another route. We recommend you tackle one of these questions and consider what data you will need to collect and how you will collect it to answer it. Do that, and then schedule a meeting to share your results with your leadership team and consider next steps.

•How well are students writing? How do you know?
•Is there a a clear plan for students to demonstrate proficiency in the Core in writing? What is it and does it help drive instruction?
•Is there a plan to support struggling writers that goes beyond the core instruction in writing? What is it?
•Do students write almost every day, across the curriculum, and for a variety of purposes? Describe what you learn in detail in the data collection and then compare it to what is expected in the standards.
•What are best practices in writing instruction ensuring students become proficient writers? How does this compare to the instruction going on in classrooms?
•Do teachers model their own writing for students and share their thinking about how they (the teachers) plan, revise, edit, and rewrite?
•Do students model their own writing for each other and for their teachers and share their thinking about how they (the students) plan, revise, edit, and rewrite?
•How are teachers supported in building their instructional skill in writing? If the district provides professional learning in writing instruction, how do you know if that instruction is being transferred into classroom instructional practice?

•Are students reading a variety of texts and having discussions about how authors constructed the text and why? How do you know?
•What systems are in place to provide feedback to students in a timely manner related to their writing assignments?
•How does your school establish inter rater reliability for teachers, so students get consistent feedback related to the writing they do in ELA and across the curriculum?
•How do you support teachers in all areas of content and curriculum to build instructional strategies in writing, especially those content areas teachers in science and social studies who may have received no preparation in writing instruction, but with the implementation of the Core are expected to implement writing activities in their classrooms?
•Do students have choice in what they write about?
•How do you align the school's current writing curriculum and instructional practices to the Core Curriculum? How do you assess that alignment?

# Questions from the Field

## *How does the Iowa Report Card define College and Career Readiness?*

The FAQs related to the Iowa School Report Card define College and Career readiness this way: "College and Career Readiness: The percentage of students who score at or above a level of performance on reading and mathematics assessments that predicts a higher probability of postsecondary success. (Middle/high schools only)."

This section of the report card is an aggregate of the student's math and reading scores on the Iowa Assessments, with an indicator of how much the student needs to grow to reach the score of 306 by their senior year in both math and reading. Those scores of 306 on math and reading are the threshold determined by Iowa Testing that students needed to score in order to be "College and Career Ready."  The "College and Career Readiness" item reports whether students met the expected progress toward those scores of 306.

The Iowa Report Card Technical Report contains more information on pages 9 and 10 about how the CCR growth was determined.

# Student Learning Services: Writing Assessments

## *WriteToLearn™*

We are in our second year of the ISFIS WriteToLearn™ program. This tool electronically scores student writing and offers immediate feedback to students and teachers for both summary and essay writing, supporting student learning in both writing and reading comprehension. In addition, there are vocabulary exercises linked to the summary writing, which help build that important reading element as well. Almost universally, the participating schools report their students are writing more than ever before. One superintendent noted in October, "Our students have written more already than they wrote all of last year."  Students are writing the kinds of essays identified as those that must be taught in the Core, including narrative, expository, and argumentative. They are summarizing numerous non-fiction documents in science and social studies that can be aligned to the content being taught in those disciplines. In fact, by the end of February, our 32 school districts participating in WriteToLearn™ had written over 100,000 essays and summaries this school year, and on each draft, students and teachers received immediate feedback.

"How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" a budding musician asks. The answer to the question the musician asks is the same as the answer to "How do students become proficient writers?" Practice, practice, practice! In order for students to have adequate practice, most teachers must assign significantly more writing. Scoring and providing feedback related to that writing is an overwhelming task for teachers and one of the reasons insufficient writing is assigned. Assigning a lot of writing takes up teachers' lives – both their personal lives outside of school and time in school better spent developing powerful lessons that provide modeling and spark student engagement.  WriteToLearn™ provides support for teachers, who are now able to assign enough writing for the students to become proficient writers in both ELA and the content areas so they can have a life outside of providing feedback for students and scoring their writing.

The summary writing scoring aligns to the content of the summary. Students receive scores on the content of their summary on a continuum of poor to excellent, and they are given hints about the important information after they offer their summary for scoring. In addition they receive feedback on spelling, grammar, repeated and unimportant information, and copying. Summary writing affects both writing improvement and reading comprehension as noted earlier in the newsletter.

Essay writing activities are scored with alignment to the Common Core or to the 6 Traits of Writing. No matter which alignment is chosen, there is significant information included in both the individual and group reports on where to proceed next in instruction. On the essays, students are offered guiding questions at the beginning, feedback on their alignment to the standards chosen, and all the extras noted above in summary writing like copying and unimportant content. This alignment to writing frameworks - the College and Career Ready Standards or the 6 Traits -  distinguishes WriteToLearn™ from other programs that offer primarily feedback on the conventions of writing and sentence structure.

If you are interested in learning more about WriteToLearn contact Susie (susie@iowaschoolfinance.com) or Josie (josie@iowaschoolfinance.com). They would be happy to travel to your district to show you WriteToLearn or demonstrate electronically.

## edifyAssess

ISFIS offers edifyAssess, an assessment program that can be used as your second assessment in addition to providing the capacity for schools, districts, and teachers to write their own assessments all year long. edifyAsses comes at 2/3 the cost of other commonly used programs. We offer benchmarks in reading (monthly) and math (three annually) aligned to the Core and will help you write benchmarks in science aligned to your scope and sequence and the Next Gen Science Standards. Locally created assessments can be developed using the edify item banks or developing locally created questions. edifyAssess offers both multiple choice and technology-enhanced questions as found on the Smarter Balanced Assessments. The standards-based reports help teachers identify where to go next instructionally. Contact Susie (susie@iowaschoolfinance.com) or Josie (josie@iowaschoolfinance.com) about edifyAssess.

# Quotes

**"In today's workplace writing is a 'threshold skill' for hiring and promotion among salaried (i.e., professional) employees. Survey results indicate that writing is a ticket to professional opportunity, while poorly written job applications are a figurative kiss of death."**
*Writing: A Ticket to Work . . . Or a Ticket Out, September 2004*

**"There's always room for a story that can transport people to another place."**
*J.K. Rowling*

**"Writing is an exploration. You start from nothing and learn as you go."**
*E. L. Doctorow*

If you have any questions about the School Improvement Booster or suggested future topics, please contact Susie Olesen at susie@iowaschoolfinance.com Iowa School Finance Information Services | 1201 63rd Street | Des Moines, IA 50311 | www.isfis.net

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