

Empowering Teachers and Students in the Writing Process Makes the Difference

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The Background of the Study

Maintaining quality instruction in the face of more rigorous standards and changing demographics schools is a national challenge. Teachers move from faculty to faculty. Students transfer from school to school throughout a year making continuity of instruction challenging at best. School attendance lines shift. The number of non-English speaking students in regular classrooms is steadily increasing. Federal, state and local funding fluctuates and assignments of building and central office administrators change more frequently than ever before. Test scores of students ping-pong about the quartiles in reports of standardized and criterion-referenced tests. Through a myriad of changes, the deliver of quality instruction with observable and measurable results is a critical concern.

When rural, urban or suburban, almost every school system has experienced the challenge of change. One example of a system in the flux of change is the Hall County School Systems located in a suburban county that is home to a growing city with merging industry that attracts residents from the greater Atlanta area. In the shadow of Lake Sidney Lanier, growth has been phenomenal in the last decade. Serving approximately 27,000 students through 17 elementary, six middle and four high schools (two additional high schools are under construction), this system is situated in one of the most rapidly expanding growth corridors in the U.S. Concurrently, it has experienced a significant increase in non-English speaking students and students who transition from school to school within the system.

In an effort to provide continuity of instruction and a seamless curriculum that meshed state standards with local goals, the director of middle/high school curriculum, Dr. Gary Stewart, determined that it was time to confront the impact of the many faces of change at the system level. Initially, the exact direction was uncertain, but the objective was

clear. Teachers and administrators must work towards stabilizing student performance and parlaying students' success from one year into the future and more mater success in subsequent years. Instruction had to be based on student needs as reflected by quantitative and qualitative measures. One thing was certain; the task of bringing stable and consistent growth in 29 schools was daunting.

The decision was to divide the challenge into parts and target only one of the parts. Following considerable deliberation, the administration decided to target only one strand of the curriculum in one component of the 6-12 continuum. The writing strand was selected for a number of reasons. But most simply,

1. Recent SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 1997-1998) visits pointed to middle schools' need for a more observable integration in instruction among the strands of the curriculum.
2. Assessment of students' writing is the best window into their minds. It is the surest way to assess students' growth accurately and fully.
3. Writing automatically adjusts to the learning level of students involved in an assignment.
4. There is no disagreement among administrators and teachers that the use of writing to help students learn has the most long-lasting affects of student behavior.
5. New state tests (Georgia Criterion Reference Competency Test—CRCT) and new standardized tests (Standard Achievement Test—SAT-9) contain items that require students to articulate their knowledge of core concepts studied in their own handwriting.

6. A state test of writing production (Middle Grades Writing Assessment—MGWA) revised in 2000 required students to show independent proficiency in the four steps of the writing process on general topics taken from the science, social studies and math curricula as well as current events.

The six middle schools (grades 6-8) were selected because of the eagerness of middle school administrators to implement a plan for writing across the curriculum and grade levels in their six schools. In their acceptance of a writing initiative, the committee of Curriculum Assistant Principals (CAPs) set parameters for their work.

1. First and foremost, the writing program must empower teachers. A steering committee of teachers with representatives from each school must lead the way, defining the nature of the writing in two forms: journal writing and extended, multi-paragraph writing like that tested by the MGWA. These teachers would be responsible for making the program work at their schools. They would in effect be teacher/trainers.
2. In turn, the program must also help teachers empower students to make decisions about their own writing. In short, the program must change the teaching of writing from “writing what teacher wants” to “writing what I’m thinking.” Students must write much more than their teachers have time to read, and they must manage and record their own progress in their writing journey through the middle grades.
3. The program must be structured, simple and easy to implement. It must allow for variations in teaching styles and learning styles. At the same time, the scope and sequence of writing activities must guarantee a consistency between schools. As students transfer from one Hall County middle school to another, teachers should be confident that they have had preparation equivalent to the students already in their classes.

4. The steering committee of teachers needs to be shown how the program works, not just told. In turn, they then would demonstrate how the program works to colleagues in their school.

The Existing Strategy

All middle school faculties worked together on to adopt textbooks to use system wide. Administrators provided staff development offerings for middle school teachers that allowed individual teachers to emerge as leaders in the various strands of the curriculum. Educators outside the system know Hall County as open to innovation and to leadership within its teacher pool. Teachers representing all six schools participated in plans for new programs in any of the subject areas. Implementation of these plans remained the task of individual schools. Hall County students fared well in comparison to students in nearby school systems, that is, until the indices of change accelerated. As students transitioned from school to school within the system, teachers noticed differences in preparation. Differences in test scores among the six schools grew.

When Dr. Stewart assumed the leadership of the middle school program, he put into place the steering committee of Curriculum Assistant Principals (CAPs), one from each of the six schools. A CAP was assigned to lead in each of the subject areas of the curriculum. Dr. Justus of West Hall Middle School took the lead in planning for teaching the language arts. She and a small group of teachers attended a session in which the changes in the assessment of writing for middle grades students were announced. That group return to Hall County with the recommendation of the experimental strategy that follows.

The Experimental Strategy

The Director of Middle/High School Education and the Middle School CAPs selected the *Writing to Win (WTWin)* management system as the program of choice for their stated objectives. The program that was developed by Dr. Warren E. Combs of Athens, GA had a history of

- empowering teachers to make commitments to specific goals in the teaching of writing
- achieving noteworthy results
- bringing about changes in teaching and learning writing in a non-threatening manner.

In addition, his theme of empowerment moved beyond teachers to students. A central theme of *WTWin* training is to move students from playing the game of “what does teacher want” to “what am I thinking” as they write.

Dr. Combs was retained to train 18 classroom teachers (one Language Arts teacher from each grade level from each school) and the CAPs from each of the schools. Resources included a *WTWin* resource guide designed for grades 6-8 teachers and wall charts for logging teachers’ expectations of students in journal and process writing. Pages in the guide led the steering committee in creating a scope and sequence of writing prompts for both process and journal writing for a full year.

The Plan

Throughout the first year, the teacher/trainers designed and completed five cycles of the writing process. Each writing cycle helped teachers teach to the standards of the Georgia MGWA. Teacher/trainers took their 90-minute planning time on four days throughout the Fall of 2000 to observe the *WTWin* consultant demonstrate effective, general strategies for 1) prewriting/drafting, 2) revising, 3) proofreading and 4) critical-thinking journal entries. They had time for debriefing with the consultant, time for asking questions about implementing the strategies from an earlier visit or the one observed that day.

All four demonstration visits were scheduled prior to the semester break (winter holiday) and prior to the administration of the Georgia MGWA to all 8th-grade students the end of January 2001. 6th, 7th and 8th-grade Language Arts teachers in particular, spend six weeks of instruction on each of the three modes of writing covered in the MGWA (a real or imagined narrative, an opinion essay and an expository report). All 6th through 8th-grader

students wrote three first drafts in each mode of writing, but took only one of the drafts through the steps of revision, proofreading and final evaluation to create a final draft that was published within the classroom or their school building. All teachers planned two rehearsals of the actual MGWA. Concurrently, teachers prompted students to write daily in their journals, often as a bell ringing activity. In a majority of the entries, students wrote 6-10 sentences analyzing a concept that they had learned in class. *WTWININ* critical-thinking journal strategies selected by the teachers included strategies A (*What I Thought You Taught*), B (*Acrostic Vocabulary*), C (*Either...Or*) and E (*Quad Clusters*). To maintain consistency among schools, the steering committee of teacher/trainers plotted the scope and sequence for process writing and journal writing for distribution among their fellow teachers.

The Results

The results of the year of managing writing under a teacher-powered scope and sequence were at once obvious and directive. These results are reported in two ways: teachers' observations and the reported results of the 2001 Georgia MGWA.

Teachers' observations

At the final May meeting of the *ad hoc* steering committee of teacher/trainers, the teachers' energy in reporting the results of Year One implementation ran high. Teachers shared personal accounts of students' growth and held up over-full writing portfolios of several students. In account after account, 6th through 8th-grade committee representatives reported that reluctant writers of one- to two-sentence journal entries began asking for more time to explain their understanding of newly learned concepts in all subject areas. Students who once resisted the rigors of prewriting, revision and proofreading became proud of 1) how distinctive their prewriting ideas were, 2) the quantity and quality of their revisions and 3) the growing percentage of errors their proofing team corrected. All in all, the report of the progress from beginning to end of the school year was most positive. A minority of teacher/trainers reported that their teachers needed further clarification of the *WTWin* initiative in order to implement the writing plan.

The 2001 Georgia Middle Grades Writing Assessment (MGWA)

The last week of January in each school year, Georgia's MGWA is administered to all 8th-grade students in public schools. Nearly 100,000 students take the timed test in the morning of a specified day of that week. Students are allowed 10 minutes to write out a plan for responding to a prompt that they have never seen previously. They have 30 minutes to create their first draft on two pages of lined paper. They are then directed to spend 20 minutes revising the content (words, sentences and paragraphs) of their first drafts before transferring the revised drafts into test booklets. They have 20 minutes to make the transfer into the booklets and 10 additional minutes for any final proofreading they deem necessary. Only the test booklets with the final drafts are sent to the Test Analysis and Reporting Office of the Georgia Department of Education located on the University of Georgia campus.

Two adults who use writing in their professional lives read and assess each student's final draft. Results of individual student, school and district performances are reported to local school superintendents the first week of May. Students are grouped into three categories. The reporting office lists those who are at risk in their judged writing performance on the test as *Not On Target*. It lists those whose judged writing performance meets the defined expectations of 8th-grade writing as *On Target*. And it lists those whose judged writing performance surpasses the expectations as *Exceeds Target*.

Therefore, scores on the MGWA before and after the implementation of the *Writing to Win* initiative should be noticeably different in the three categories. As in all implementations of new educational programs, the degree of implementation (and the results) will vary from school to school and teacher to teacher. Thus, the results in the Hall County middle schools could have been predicted. In four of the six middle schools, teacher/trainers were all present and accounted for at all of the demonstration/ training visits. Since they participated in the creation of the Year One plan and were informed in a timely manner of their responsibilities in implementing that plan, they reported that all

language arts teachers at their schools followed the plan with consistency. Of course that means that there were two schools whose teacher/trainers could not provide such a report.

Therefore, in a test such as the MGWA, the results should separate the six Hall County middle schools into two groups. If the *Writing to Win* management system truly makes a difference in teachers' and students' effectiveness in teaching and learning writing, the differences between these two groups of schools should be obvious.

Differences in the 2000-2001 MGWA reports. The change in the scores of writing performance of 8th-grade students in group in these two consecutive years is quite distinctive (see Table 1). Students scoring *Not On Target* in 2000 numbered 296 or 23% of those taking the test. With the implementation of the *WTWin* initiative, students scoring *Not On Target* in 2001 numbered only 150, roughly half of the number in 2000. At the same time the 8th-grade students scoring *On Target* rose roughly the same amount, from 878 to 1059, from 67% of the students in 2000 to 79% of the students in 2001. The percentage of students who scored *Exceeds Target* remained roughly the same (138 to 132, 11% to 10%).

Table 1
Number of Students Scoring in Three Categories, 2000-2001

Year	Total Number of Students	Students Not on Target	Students On Target	Students who Exceed Target
2000	1312 (100%)	296 (23%)	878 (67%)	138 (11%)
2001	1341 (100%)	150 (11%)	1059 (79%)	132 (10%)

Differences between the two groups of schools on the 2001 MGWA. The performance of 8th-grade students for the four schools reporting full implementation of the year 1 plan is reported as group A. The performance of students in the two schools with incomplete implementation is reported as group B. Note that in two of the categories—*Not On Target* and *On Target*—the differences between the two groups are notable. The differences between the two groups on *Exceeds Target* are negligible. 8th-grade students

in Group A schools make up 69% of the 8th-grade population in Hall County Schools, but they account for only 47% of those scoring in the category *Not On Target*. By contrast, students in Group B schools make up only 31% of the population, but account for over 53% of those scoring in the category *Not On Target*.

Similarly, 8th-grade students in Group A schools make up 69% of the 8th-grade population in Hall County Schools, but they account for over 74% of those scoring in the category *On Target*. By contrast, students in Group B schools make up 31% of the population, but account for only 26% of those scoring in the category *Not On Target*. The students in the category *Exceeds Target* were evenly distributed among the schools from both groups.

Table 2
Number of Students in Two Groups Scoring in Three Categories, 2001

Group	Total Number of Students	Students Not on Target	Students On Target	Students who Exceed Target
All six schools	1341 (100%)	150 (100%)	1059 (100%)	132 (100%)
Group A	936 (69%)	71 (47%)	779 (74%)	86 (66%)
Group B	405 (31%)	79 (53%)	280 (26%)	46 (33%)

An analysis of the percentage of 8th-students in Group A and Group B schools scoring in three categories reinforces the differences observed in a frequency analysis of students in each category. In the 2001 MGWA report, 11% of students district wide scored *Not On Target*. That percentage for students from Group A schools is only 8%, for students from Group B schools, 19%. Similarly, 78% of the students district-wide scored *On Target*. The percentage for students from Group A, however, was just over 82%, while the percentage for students from Group B schools remained below 69%. The students in the category *Exceeds Target* were evenly distributed among the schools from both groups.

Table 3
Percentage of Students in Two Groups Scoring in Three Categories, 2001

Group	Total Number of Students	Students Not on Target	Students On Target	Students who Exceed Target
All six schools	1341	11%	78%	11%
Group A	936	8%	82%	11%
Group B	406	19%	69%	11%

Conclusions and Direction for Future Development

The *ad hoc* steering committee for writing of Hall County Middle Schools drew the following conclusions from the results reported above. The Hall County Middle School version of the *Writing to Win* management system has produced significant growth in writing skills among 8th grade students as measured by their scores on the 2000 and 2001 Georgia Middle Grades Writing Assessment (MGWA). Since that data is consistent with the teachers' observations of growth in 8th-grade students' writing, the committee felt that the plan fully implemented exceeds the expectations of teachers and administrators prior. Teachers reported the ease with which students transferred within the district from school to school where the program was fully implemented.

The committee also noted a significant difference between schools that reported a full vs. partial implementation of the year 1 plan for the writing program. Students in the fully implemented schools were more likely to score on target than students in the partially implemented schools. They were also less likely to score in the *Not On Target* category (below the target). It should also be noted that of the 47 papers that could not be scored, only seven came from schools with full implementation of the program.

There is direction for future work in the data, however. Roughly ten percent of the students from all schools scored in the *Exceeds Target* category. In Year Two, language arts teachers need to focus more attention on the students who could easily move up into this category. The committee agreed that the strategies of *Framed Drafts* (Drafting Section) and *Sentence-combining* (Skills Section) in the *WTWin* resource guide need to be implemented. Earlier research into the effect of the *Individualized Language Arts (ILA)* program and sentence-combining practice have a documented effect on the scores of writing style. Increased scores of writing style could place more students into the *Exceeds Target* group. Also, since short-answer essay items are beginning to appear in Georgia's math, social studies and science tests in the middle grades, Year Two will be expanded to include the training of the Hall County middle school teachers in the use of critical-thinking journal strategies.

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