

# Projects and Partnerships: Writing, Teaching, and Learning in the School District of Philadelphia

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What institutional structures support teachers as writers, researchers, and reformers within their schools and school districts? What does it mean for organizations to collaborate in providing that support? Discussion of these questions is at the heart of the partnership among the School District of Philadelphia, PATHS/PRISM: The Philadelphia Partnership for Education, and the Philadelphia Writing Project (PhilWP).

By describing the history of the partnership and detailing the development of specific structures for supporting teachers and schools, we hope to illuminate some important issues for others engaged in collaborative work of this kind. Through looking closely at two programs, the Cross-Visitation Program and the Writing Assessment Program, we will demonstrate the power of partnerships in creating supportive structures for school and curricular reform in the teaching of writing, as well as some of the struggles and problems that arise in attempting to keep such a partnership responsive to the changing needs of teachers, administrators, and schools.

## **Beginnings of the Partnership**

Since 1984 the School District of Philadelphia has been engaged in a systemwide effort to help teachers change their understandings and uses of writing in their classrooms. From the beginning Philadelphia's

writing across the curriculum (WAC) efforts have included a strong focus both on writing for teaching and learning across the disciplines and on professional development opportunities for the teachers who ultimately realize the systemwide goals through their classroom practices. This vision was articulated by Dr. Constance Clayton early in her superintendency of the School District of Philadelphia. At the outset, Dr. Clayton's vision gave priority to the role of writing for students' engagement in learning in school and to the formation of partnerships that would enable her goals for the school district to be realized.

Nationally a number of foundations and business and university consortia had already joined together to support reform efforts in K-12 public schools. In Philadelphia in the early 1980s Dr. Clayton's reform agenda attracted the interest and support of area corporations, universities, foundations, and cultural institutions and led to the formation of the Committee to Support the Philadelphia Public Schools (CSPPS). The membership of CSPPS made the innovative decision to found an organization that would work directly with Philadelphia teachers and schools. This strategy resulted in the creation in 1984 of PATHS/PRISM: The Philadelphia Partnership for Education.

Dr. Clayton's vision for change in classrooms included the development of teacher leadership, a broad view of writing, and opportunities for educators at all levels of the school system to engage in rethinking the purposes and practices connected with the teaching of writing in schools. PATHS/PRISM launched the pilot WAC effort in the 1984-85 school year, involving 28 of Philadelphia's more than 250 schools. In each of Philadelphia's subregions, teams of teachers, administrators, and faculty from area universities came together in professional development workshops that explored a wide range of issues and practices concerning the field of writing.

Participants in the regional workshops then returned to their schools to share, discuss, and implement some of these new ideas and classroom practices. During the pilot year, goals included both the introduction and dissemination of new approaches to using writing to learn and the building of collegial structures that supported change in classrooms, within schools, and within regions. Each region benefited from university consultants who provided both leadership for the professional development workshops and advice on program structures.

Positive evaluations of the pilot year led to expansion of the program and to discussions of ways to support and deepen the work that had begun in the schools. Of particular importance were the connections between the university consultants and the school teams, as well as the opportunities for teachers to work closely with other teachers. A problem teachers identified early in the program was the need for more time to talk about the new ideas in the writing field and

more opportunities to try new practices in collaboration with their colleagues. Teachers rightly observed that many of the innovative ideas in the teaching of writing would require significant change in their overall classroom practices and that these changes could not be accomplished quickly or easily.

During the fall and winter of 1985 conversations and discussions that were focused on meeting these emerging needs led to the conclusion that Philadelphia's efforts to enhance writing in the classroom would benefit substantially from the founding of a National Writing Project site, specifically dedicated to School District of Philadelphia educators and students. The National Writing Project (NWP), currently comprised of more than 150 sites, is an organization established to create school-university partnerships to improve the teaching of writing in schools. The NWP makes clear its basic principles to accomplish this task: teachers themselves are the best teachers of other teachers; teachers of writing must write themselves; as researchers in classrooms, teachers can inform both theory and practice; and real change in classroom practice happens over time.

University of Pennsylvania faculty at the Graduate School of Education, working in collaboration with PATHS/PRISM and the School District of Philadelphia, designed a proposal to create a site of the NWP, the Philadelphia Writing Project (PhilWP), which then began offering summer institutes and a range of ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers in 1986.

The partnership among the school district, PATHS/PRISM, and PhilWP teachers works in many ways to support teachers, with each partner providing different kinds of resources for the various activities and programs. For example, each summer, intensive invitational institutes are offered by PhilWP, and teacher fellowships to these institutes are provided by the school district. Cross-visitation during the school day by PhilWP teacher-consultants, enabling teachers to learn from and with their colleagues, occurs through the school district's funding of writing support teachers for each subregion. Regional miniconferences, conducted as part of the ongoing WAC effort are supported by the partnership and provide leadership opportunities for teacher-consultants. The partnership works at many levels to foster the teaching of writing in schools and to support teachers working with other teachers.

## **The Partnership in Action: Structures for Teacher Collaboration**

### *The Cross-Visitation Program*

Upon completion of the 1986 Summer Institute a group of thirty-two teachers, K-12, became the first PhilWP teacher-consultants, eligible to participate in cross-visitation with one another and with colleagues

citywide. During the school day, teacher-consultants may visit other teachers' classrooms or may receive visitors in their own classrooms to work together on broad questions and practices involving the teaching of writing. These cross-visitations may take place within school buildings or may bring together teachers whose schools are miles apart. Drawing upon ongoing WAC efforts in schools across the city, PATHS/PRISM and PhilWP assist in building the network of cross-visitation by linking teacher-consultants with interested colleagues. Currently there are 250 teacher-consultants in PhilWP; this year about 110 of them are involved in cross-visitation with more than 1,000 fellow teachers.

Gail Sklar, a high school special education teacher-consultant for the Philadelphia Writing Project, wrote a reflective journal on her cross-visitation with colleagues at her school:

[After an initial invitation to meet together] what I found were teachers anxious to talk about the writing they were having their students do in the classroom. They were also eager for suggestions on how to expand writing activities. . . . I met with teachers of woodshop, auto mechanics, science, and physical education. . . . One of the first teachers I collaborated with was the woodshop teacher. We met and discussed the kinds of writing he already had his students do. Next, I went into his room to get a better sense of what occurred in his classroom. We met again, and decided to collaborate on a final project—an exhibition. . . . Now, when I meet some of these teachers in the hall, our dialogue continues. We discuss what worked and what was not as successful. We've gotten to know each other a bit better. Perhaps this experience has chipped away at a little of the isolation we, as high school teachers, face.

Cross-visitation creates opportunities for collegial learning during the school day and begins to break down some of the barriers that isolate teachers within classrooms, schools, or subject areas. This program is made possible in each region by the writing support teachers provided by the School District of Philadelphia. These teachers, most of whom have participated in PhilWP summer institutes, are specially designated substitute teachers who work only with teacher-consultants and participating fellow teachers.

Among the aims of the Cross-Visitation Program is the encouragement of teacher inquiry and writing about students, classrooms, educational issues, and the program itself. Through PhilWP publications such as *The Voice* and *Work in Progress*, as well as a range of professional journals, participants in the program share their knowledge, practices, and perspectives with one another and with a wider national audience.

Cross-visitation has helped to create a network of teachers who can share ideas and ask questions of their colleagues about the teaching of writing. It provides the opportunity for “teachers to make sense of and

improve their everyday practice, not by imitating routines and strategies but rather by questioning, observing, documenting and discussing their own work in relation to the work of others" (Lytle and Fecho 1991).

It also provides much-needed time for teachers to create and implement specific plans for curricular change with colleagues within their school. An elementary teacher-consultant, Jean Farlino, writes:

This is the fourth year that Mrs. J. and I are collaborating on the teaching of writing with her third-grade class. . . . We have begun to use portfolios for assessing writing. As a start we have been reading through current literature on the topic and looking closely at the logistics of keeping portfolios. Secondly, we have decided to start small by choosing four students. . . . Lastly, we agreed to review the portfolios monthly.

The Cross-Visitation Program exemplifies the ways in which the resources of the partners work together to enable teachers to share knowledge, inquire about practices, and broaden perspectives through classroom-based collaboration. The network of teachers involved in cross-visitation has also helped to disseminate ideas and innovations across schools and throughout the school district. Sharing information within and across communities of teachers has also been an important way for teachers to develop ideas and locate resources to support their work.

### *The Writing Assessment Program*

Another Philadelphia Writing Project teacher-consultant, Carol Merrill, wrote about her colleagues' learning in her final report on a seventh-grade citywide workshop on writing assessment:

Through the series of workshops the teachers in this group widened the lens through which they saw student writing and the students as individuals. . . . Teachers learned through real experiences . . . that there is value in looking for the positive aspects in a student's writing. . . . Teachers started to see what their students were able to learn from the assignments and that merely evaluating what *is not* present tends to blind a teacher to what *is* present in a student's writing. . . . Participants said that they would look at student writing differently now; they would try to see things more from the student's vantage point.

The Writing Assessment Program was initiated by the School District of Philadelphia in 1986, coordinated by PATHS/PRISM, and led by teacher-consultants of the Philadelphia Writing Project. The program was initially devised to provide teachers with approaches to writing assessment that matched the perspectives on teaching writing

that were part of the overall WAC effort. As a result, the school district invited PATHS/PRISM and PhilWP to provide programmatic coordination, university consultants, and teacher-consultant leadership. Over the next several years (1986–1991), the program evolved through a range of structures and formats. For example, groups of teachers of particular grades (three, five, seven, eleven) and subjects (English, social studies, mathematics, science) gathered in citywide workshops to compare and discuss the kinds of student writing taking place in their classrooms and the criteria they used to assess student progress. All of these workshop groups were led by teams of teacher-consultants who not only facilitated the sessions but also designed a workshop syllabus, including resource materials and group activities. More than five hundred and forty teacher-consultants took part in this citywide format for the program.

When the Writing Assessment Program adopted a school-based format, PhilWP teacher-consultants on the faculty of each participating school provided program leadership. The school-based Writing Assessment Program was a response to the growing awareness, both locally and nationally, that the possibilities for real change in teaching and learning were substantially limited unless whole schools, as well as individual classrooms, became engaged in purposeful innovation. Many individual teachers were already trying to make changes in their own classrooms, but were frustrated by not having enough opportunities to discuss these changes with their colleagues or to pursue innovative changes as part of a collaborative whole-school effort.

Within each school the participating teachers reflected a range of grades and subjects. The school-based format encouraged sharing and discussion of teachers' differing expectations and assumptions regarding student writing. These school-based conversations across the grades and disciplines proved extremely meaningful to the participating teachers.

A powerful lesson, as teacher-consultant Carol Merrill stated above, was the need for teachers to look closely at individual students when evaluating their work. This vital link between students' work and teachers' assessment practices came alive when teachers looked at student writing as texts to be learned from, rather than simply as papers to be evaluated.

When teachers within the same school community looked at student writing together, they began to see new possibilities for reshaping both curriculum and assessment in ways that would better support student learning. These school-based teacher efforts received significant school district support through the creation in 1991 of a Citywide Task Force on Portfolio and Performance-Based Assessment. PhilWP and PATHS/PRISM, as members of the task force, were among the

organizations providing professional development opportunities to teachers carrying out pilot projects in portfolio and performance-based assessment in elementary and middle schools.

During the spring of 1992, school-based teams of teachers explored and began to develop a range of tools and approaches for assessing student learning, including parent and student surveys, developmental checklists, and interdisciplinary projects. Teams worked to define what kinds of portfolios made sense for their students and their schools. Pilot project efforts drew heavily on teachers' earlier experiences in the Writing Assessment Program and on teacher-consultant involvement on many school teams. Support for the pilot project teams included a seminar, "Assessment and Teacher Inquiry," jointly sponsored by PATHS/PRISM and PhilWP, which provided opportunities for sharing ideas and projects across schools and for learning from current research.

The seminar was designed to support teachers' inquiry into large questions, as well as specific practices, in the area of assessment. A middle school social studies teacher, Dennis Barnebey, reflected on his own learning as he worked to develop an alternative assessment project with other teachers in his school:

Collaboration is expected, if not required, if we are going to find new ways of helping students to learn. Teachers must collaborate with students, students with students, and teachers with teachers. It seems we will be putting "new wine in old skins" if we don't build in all three levels of collaboration in any project we undertake to change what happens in our schools. . . . Without a doubt, there has been no greater boost to my teaching career than having had the opportunity to collaborate with other like-minded colleagues. . . . We must be able to look at children, understand what they are able to do, challenge them to learn as much as they can, and assess their growth fairly in a way which does not make us all crazy or exhausted. Key to all of this is establishing the atmosphere in a room, or school, that encourages positive collaboration.

These pilot assessment projects are currently in their second year. While it is too soon to say what effects the projects will ultimately have on changing assessment practices throughout the school district, participating teachers have benefited from opportunities to examine their own practices, develop new approaches to assessment, and reflect on their learning.

### **Changes and Challenges for the Partnership**

The School District of Philadelphia's emphasis on writing as integral to all student learning had encouraged teachers to investigate their own classroom practices in the teaching of writing and to develop some new

approaches to the teaching of writing in their classrooms. During the past nine years substantial numbers of teachers have drawn upon the professional development opportunities represented by PATHS/PRISM and PhilWP programs and have used these opportunities to build new connections with colleagues, within and across schools. Through programs offered by these two organizations and with the support of the School District of Philadelphia, a climate for innovation has been created within many schools in the district. Thematic and interdisciplinary approaches, literature-based reading programs, writing in math and science, and learning from colleagues are among the noticeable changes in curriculum, instruction, and professional relationships.

While these changes are both noticeable and positive, many challenges remain. Partnerships require time and energy to flourish; collaboration over time takes time. Writing across the curriculum began with twenty-eight schools in 1984, and PhilWP began with thirty-two teacher-consultants in 1986. As WAC grew to include all of Philadelphia's schools, and PhilWP expanded to 250 teacher-consultants, both organizations have experienced the challenges of program growth. The energy and responsiveness of teachers challenge our organizations to provide growing levels of resources and support structures.

At the same time, responding to the needs and interests of teachers and schools becomes more complex as teachers and schools ask a broader range of educational questions. The investigation of classroom and school practices around writing has widened to include broad issues of restructuring teaching, learning, and schooling. As a result, our organizations are challenged to provide support, technical assistance, resources, and expertise around an increasingly diverse and sophisticated educational reform agenda.

A final pair of challenges concerns responsiveness to divergent but equally important needs. One of these is the significance of maintaining citywide and K-12 dialogue on students, curriculum, and standards, even as individual schools are encouraged to pursue site-based innovations. Both of our organizations are committed to assisting school-based reform while also continuing to support teachers' efforts to overcome the classroom-bound or school-bound isolation that previously characterized so much of their experience.

Perhaps the most complicated challenge of all is that of responding to the diverse professional growth needs of both new and experienced teachers. Keeping programs dynamic rather than static is not easy, but it is essential if we are to meet the needs of an ever-changing population of teachers. At any one time and over time, a range of programs and professional opportunities needs to be available if teachers with varying interests, at different stages of professional growth, are to find the resources and networks they desire.



If the complicated challenges described above are to be addressed with any measure of success, especially in a large urban school district, partnerships such as those we have detailed are essential. The maintenance of the partnership among the School District of Philadelphia, PATHS/PRISM, and PhilWP has not been without its growing pains. At the same time, this partnership, which has evolved and flourished over more than seven years, is the source of some of the most substantive professional development opportunities available to Philadelphia teachers. While many challenges remain, we are heartened by the continuing efforts of the partners to sustain productive collaboration in support of teachers and students.

### Reference

- Lytle, Susan L., and Robert Fechol. 1991. "Meeting Strangers in Familiar Places: Teacher Collaboration by Cross-Visitation." *English Education*. (February): 8.