

When Most Students Have Special Needs

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Over a number of years, we administrators in this small, poor rural South Georgia school district observed a shift in student population. From a district with a diversity of rural students, our county school populations homogenized, largely black students, 100 % on free breakfast and lunch programs. Scores on tests of reading, math and writing indicated an increasing percentage of students qualifying for special help. The state Department of Education identified the district for possible intervention to raise students' performance. Consistent with high percentages of low-performing students, a survey of school personnel reported that 1) few parents are visibly involved in their students' education and that 2) few students see the relationship between what they study in school and their lives, present or future.

Demographic data for the county in 1997 showed that 29% of Terrell County's children live in poverty. The median household income was under \$22,000 with 63% of households under \$25,000. 28% of all household income comes from transfer payments. 64% of live births in the county were to unwed mothers, half of these to teen-age mothers. 48% of adults in the county had not completed high school. The high school graduating class posted a 39% graduation rate and 60% of the students entering college required learning support. According to the Georgia Public School Report Card, Terrell had high enrollment in compensatory programs—14% special education, 33% remedial education and 26% SIA; all schools serve as Title I schools.

Clearly these persisting economic, social and educational descriptors portray a population facing significant challenges as it sends its students into a high-tech, 21st century. Equally as clear, these challenges which threaten to overwhelm Terrell County's progress and the future of its students, pass directly to the schools. Students from fragmented families with inadequate education, families too poorly financed to provide security much less enrichment, bring to the classrooms of Terrell County Schools profound needs for support and compensatory efforts. Certified and non-certified staffs in these schools embrace these challenges as obligations and are actively seeking resources to provide for these students.

With such widespread need among students, we administrators also saw increased issues in teacher morale and student discipline. It was obvious to us that as long as we and our teachers kept doing as we had been doing, the trends would persist. At Carver Elementary School, our principal took the lead in instigating changes that they fit our students. She introduced school uniforms; she upgraded instructional software in the school's computer lab; she approved our adopting a writing initiative that had worked effectively with student populations similar to ours, the *Writing to Win (WTW)* management system of Athens, GA. We wanted to believe that *WTW* could reverse the direction of the trends that we had observed over recent years. *WTW* encouraged teachers to see

1. Writing as an on-going assessment of students' thought process (daily journal writing for fluency in critical thinking patterns). Writing provides the clearest window into students' minds. Daily writing could provide a fuller and more accurate index of students' mental development.

2. That writing automatically adjusts to the learning level of students involved.
3. That writing is self-motivating. Success in writing breeds further success in writing.
4. That students' *writing to learn* what they are taught brings closure for them. It helps them articulate what they have learned better and retain what they have learned longer.
5. Increased test scores in the writing of needy students require consistency among teachers in both daily journal writing and weekly process writing. Every process writing assignment has to adhere to the standards of the state's 5th-grade writing assessment administered each January. Specifically, students have to be prompted to prewrite (both brainstorm and jot list ideas), draft, revise first drafts and proofread final drafts. Teachers evaluate (grade) final drafts using rubrics based on the state's standards for testing. All teachers follow a common scope and sequence of journal and process writing that they plan for their grade level.

The implementation of the program proceeded under the direction of Carver's lead teacher who taught reading half a day and led teachers in all strands of the curriculum. Ms. Malone's notes on the strategy for implementing the *Writing to Win* initiative include

1998-1999

- I conducted staff development with fellow leader teacher, Barbara Dale in how to use the *WTW* manual and explained the different components of the program.
- Dr. Combs visited six times throughout the year, modeling strategies of journal and process writing with students for teachers to emulate. All strategies exist in the *WTW* resource guide for grades 3-5.
- I helped teachers prepare and organize use of writing folders for each student according to the *WTW* model.

- Dr. Combs explained that Year 1 was a year of “finding our way.” During the final visit of the year, teachers pulled together their best writing ideas of the year and mapped out a scope and sequence of journal and process writing to follow for Year 2.

1999-2000

- I met with the faculty by grade level and went over the structure of the program as we mapped it out previously. District provided the portfolios for journal and process writing. I reviewed the plan for draft six modes of writing per grade level, the one revision and proofreading strategy to be introduced and practiced throughout each year. We revisited the organization of the journal side of the portfolios: i.e. journal prompts require critical-thinking patterns twice weekly.
- As teachers needed the Word Bank (prewriting form) for each six-week Writing Cycle, I provided the appropriate one. 5th-grade teachers moved away from the Work Banks as the students writing a 2nd and 3rd first draft in a Writing Cycle.
- I provided teachers with the yearly calendar of weekly requirements for process writing. I worked with students in classes where teachers felt uncomfortable with the *WTW* strategies.
- I collected the journals from every classroom and responded to three journal entries randomly and the final draft of all 3rd through 5th-grade students during the last week of the Writing Cycle. I made encouraging comments wherever possible on the students’ writing and teacher’s implementation of the program.
- I completed the *WTW* checklists for administrators on each teacher, then conferenced with each teacher who did not come up with “all checks” on the checklist. I presented the checklists to the principal for her review. By the third six-week Writing Cycle all teachers showed that they were working with the *WTW* program, understanding that the program would not go away.
- Dr. Combs continue with visits of an abbreviated staff development plan, largely demonstration lessons that modeled advanced prewriting, revising and proofreading techniques for teachers

2000-2001

- I conducted a three-hour staff development session on how students' writing is evaluated by state department raters on the 5th-grade-writing test. We discussed strategies for "bumping up" students' writing from one stage to the next in the Developmental Stages Scoring Guide published by the Georgia State Department of Education.
- Year 3 continued much as Year 2 with the exception that students turned in entire journals instead of selected entries (this helped insure that daily journal writing occurred instead of just the six entries per Writing Cycle that had to be selected and submitted during each six weeks).
- I conducted an orientation for new teachers on how to use the *WTW* management system. I continued to assess students' process and journal writing each six weeks as in Year 2. I used the same scope and sequence of Writing Cycles and journal entries as in year 2. I completed the Writing Checklists as before on a six-week cycle.
- Dr. Combs continued with visits on the Year 2 schedule as requested by teachers at each grade level.

Schedule of Writing Cycle applied to dates in Year 2, 2000-2001

- Week of . . .

August 21	1 st Draft #1, mode of writing selected by teachers in grades 3-5
August 28	1 st Draft #2
Sept 5	1 st Draft #3
Sept 11	Revision of one of the three 1 st Drafts, creation of final draft
Sept 18	Proofreading of the final draft
Sept 25	Evaluating/Publishing (final drafts displayed in hallways)
Sept 29	All teachers turn in Writing Portfolios with all process writing and journal entries
- Week of . . .

Oct 2	1 st Draft # 1 of the mode of writing selected by teachers at each grade level, 3-5
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Oct 9	1 st Draft #2
Oct 16	1 st Draft #3
Oct 23	Revision of one of the three 1 st Drafts, creation of final draft
Oct 30	Proofreading of the final draft
Nov 6	Evaluating/Publishing (final drafts displayed in cafetorium)
Nov 10	Teachers turn in Writing Portfolios with all process writing and journal entries

Scope and Sequence of the first Writing Cycle planned by 3rd-Grade Teachers

(all pages refer to *Writing to Win* resource guide, grades 3-5, Erincort Consulting, 1998)

1st Six-week cycle – Mode Personal Narration (identify a specific audience)

1—1st Draft #1 – “My first day at school” (students select a grade level)

2—1st Draft #2 – “Really Surprised”

3—1st Draft #3 – “My Story that ended with a scar on my _____.”

4—Revision – Jot & Blend (add an average of two red words/sentence),
Revision Strategy #9, p. R-13.

5—Proofreading – Proofreading Pairs, Proofreading Strategy #3, p. PR-7.

6—Evaluating/Publishing – Students and then their teachers apply the
Narration final evaluation form, p. E-28. Writing displayed on
bulletin boards outside of classrooms.

Sample Checklist Completed for One Classroom Teacher

Writing to Win, 2000-2001

Teacher/Class _____ Date 3—6—00

Evidence

<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>	
<u>X</u>	___	1. Daily dated journal entries.
___	<u>X</u>	2. At least two higher-order thinking journal strategies per week in each students' portfolio.
<u>X</u>	___	3. Three 1 st drafts with <i>Word Banks</i> (5 th -grade required to wean students from <i>Word Banks</i>). Titles logged in on <i>Writing Cycle</i> page inserted in right pocket of writing portfolio.
<u>X</u>	___	4. One 1 st draft revised and taken to completion.
<u>X</u>	___	5. Revision strategy followed as outlined on the <i>WTW</i> scope and sequence guide.
<u>X</u>	___	6. Proofreading strategy followed as outlined on the <i>WTW</i> scope and sequence guide.
<u>X</u>	___	7. Final Evaluation Form for appropriate mode of writing completed on each student and final grade assigned.

Comments *All folders were complete and organized. I saw that you required students to add two words/sentence during revision. Good evidence that students pairs found 75% of errors in proofreading. Final Evaluation Forms completed fully with students in mind.*

Journals: Increase the frequency of Quad Clusters in light of the approaching SAT-9 and Georgia CRCT. Establish a variety of critical-thinking strategies in your Log of Entries.

There was evidence that every 3rd through 5th-grade teacher required students to produce writing through each step of the six Writing Cycles of the 2000-2001 school year. Furthermore, each of the teachers required students to submit satisfactory journal entries as planned in the *WTW* calendar for the school year. The results on the state writing test

correlated remarkably with the degree to which teachers followed the *WTW* plan. In January of 1998, none of the Carver Elementary School teachers followed a systematic writing initiative. In January of 1999, the teachers were in Year 1 the effect of the *WTW* implementation was noticeable, if not significant. However by January 2000 when the vast majority of teachers followed the *WTW* plan, the shift upward through the stages of the Developmental Stages Scoring Guide was quite significant. As 100% teacher participation was achieved in the fall of 2000, the scores in January of 2001 had risen to the level of the state average and well above the average school system in the geographic region around Terrell County (RESA). Table 1 illustrates this strong trend that substantiates the marked reversal of the change in writing scores of Terrell County 5th-grade students. As administrators of Terrell County Schools for some time, we were certain our adapted version of the *WTW* Management System met the needs of our special population of 430 students. We are committed to our writing plan and believe that over time it will impact reading test scores and ultimately the demographics of students' school performance in Terrell County Schools.

Table 1

Percentage of Students Scoring at Each Stage of Writing

Developmental Stage	Jan '98	Jan '99	Jan '00	January, 2001.....		
				Terrell	RESA	Georgia
1—Emerging Writer	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
2—Developing Writer	9.82	13.70	2.80	.80	.60	.90
3—Focusing Writer	47.32	38.70	14.20	13.80	16.50	14.00
4—Experimenting Writer	32.14	34.70	60.40	54.50	49.40	43.10
5—Engaging Writer	8.04	8.10	18.90	27.60	27.10	31.40
6—Extending Writer	2.68	.80	3.80	3.30	5.60	10.00

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