

# **Humboldt County School District Writing Initiative**

## **Outcomes**

Students will build fluency and stamina in writing.

Students will increase proficiency as writers in the three modes of writing specified in the NVACS.

## **Question**

How does K-6 weekly district-wide professional development centered around writing instruction aligned to NVACS impact student writing?

## **Background**

For the past several years, HCSD has focused a late-start professional development time for elementary teachers K-6 district-wide on aligning instruction with the NVACS. For the 2015-16 school year, the district changed the focus from NVACS Mathematics to NVACS ELA. Knowing the extensive scope of work to align instruction with the ELA standards, a Design Team met in the spring of 2015 to narrow the focus. The Design Team consisted of a handful of teachers from across the district's elementary schools, the NRPDP director and regional ELA coordinators, as well as the HCSD Assistant Superintendent.

Taking into consideration test scores and additional widespread evidence of need through informal interviews, the committee chose to focus on writing. Knowing the time and effort required to build district-wide professional development from scratch, the Design Team suggested that the district consider a bold curricular move and purchase the Lucy Calkins *Units of Study in Opinion/Argument, Information, and Narrative Writing* for all teachers K-6 and implement the recommended teaching methods on a broad scale.

The Units of Study were carefully crafted over a number of years, include the input of many educators, are aligned with CCSS in writing, and are grounded in 30+ years of research through Columbia University's Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. Additionally, the Units of Study are a comprehensive resource providing not only lesson plans, unit plans, and assessment materials, but extensive teacher support including professional reading and coaching tips designed to build capacity around teaching writing. They have proven effective in many classrooms, schools, and districts across the country.

The district chose to follow the recommendation of the Design Team and purchased the materials for all teachers K-6 knowing that, in order to understand and implement the teaching methods described, and knowing the comprehensive nature of the materials, consistent and careful planning and support for educators would be crucial in moving forward to improve writing across the district.

## Structure

The Design Team met regularly during the spring of 2015 to conceptualize the overall plan for the year and NNRPDP coordinators then assumed responsibility for creating weekly learning plans and sharing those plans with site facilitators chosen to lead the learning at each school. All elementary teachers K-6 at the district's four main elementary schools, led by site facilitators, participated in this professional learning in hour long sessions once a week for 28 weeks. All but one PD session per month focused on professional learning around NVACS writing using the materials provided; one session per month focused on NVACS math in order to maintain the impact gained in previous years.

The plan design engendered a strong “feedback loop” where NNRPDP coordinators created and “fed forward” the learning plan; site facilitators then led the learning at their school while systematically collecting data from teachers about what was working and what might need to be adjusted. Site facilitators provided this feedback to NNRPDP coordinators through a shared digital document as well as in weekly one-hour “huddles.” This timely feedback was used to adjust and differentiate the plan to meet specific learning needs at sites.

Initial sessions focused on building a basic understanding of the materials' components which include:

- *Units of Study* focused on each NVACS mode of writing with teaching points, minilessons, conferences, and small group work for a comprehensive workshop curriculum.
- *A Guide to the Common Core Writing Workshop* describing the essential principles, methods, and structures of effective writing workshop instruction.
- *If...Then...Curriculum: Assessment-Based Instruction* containing additional units to support and extend instruction and to prepare students for work in the main units as needed.
- *Writing Pathways: Performance Assessments and Learning Progressions*, an assessment system offering learning progressions, performance assessments, student checklists, rubrics, and leveled writing exemplars.
- *Resources for Teaching Writing CD-ROM* providing unit-specific print resources to support teaching the units.
- *Units of Study Trade Book Packs* used to model effective writing techniques, encourage students to read as writers, and provide background knowledge.

Once teachers gained familiarity with all of the components in the materials as well as their format and uses, the structure of the professional learning sessions became very predictable alternating between a focus on content one week and analyzing student writing the following week. Sessions that focused on content included professional reading and discussion activities designed to build strong pedagogical content knowledge around teaching writing. Sessions that focused on analyzing student writing required teachers to bring student writing and, using the

assessment materials listed above, analyze strengths and needs in order to make sound instructional decisions to move the whole class, small groups, and individual writers forward.

### Measuring Growth

Site facilitators provided a pre and post copy of student writing from any unit they taught during the year (units typically last from 4-8 weeks). Some provided pre and post samples from other teachers as well. The researcher used the NVACS writing rubrics which are grade-specific for grades K-2 and banded for grades 3-8 to score the writing. NVACS writing rubrics assess five categories: Purpose/Focus, Organization, Elaboration, Language and Vocabulary, and Conventions. In the 4-point scale, a score of 1 or 2 indicates non-proficient while a score of 3 or 4 indicates proficient in a given category (See Appendix F, Opinion Rubric 3-5).

### Results and Discussion

For this study, the researcher focused strictly on student outcomes in writing rather than teacher outcomes since student outcomes are the most important measure of whether a particular instructional method or focus had a positive impact on learning. As shown in Figure 12 below, the results of the district-wide focus on writing K-6 using research-based, NVACS-aligned materials are notable.

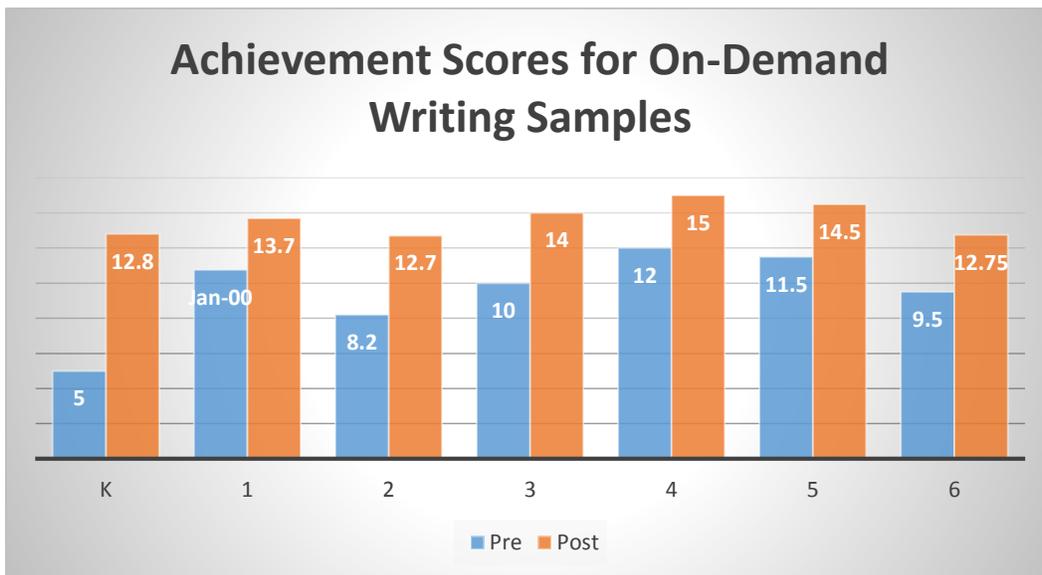


Figure 1: Scores for On Demand Writing

Teachers collected a writing sample from students prior to teaching a unit in one of the NVACS writing modes. They collected another writing sample at the end of the unit in order to assess growth. As shown in Figure 13, students made notable growth in a 4-8 week period.

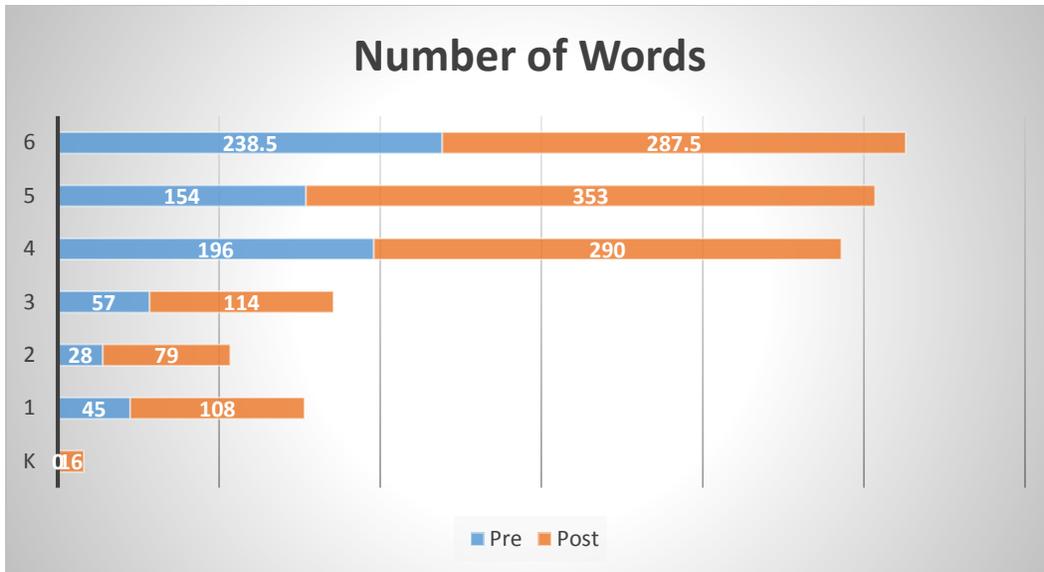


Figure 2: Number of Words

While not a direct measure of fluency and stamina, measuring the number of words students wrote correlates. Students produced a far greater volume of writing in the post assessments.

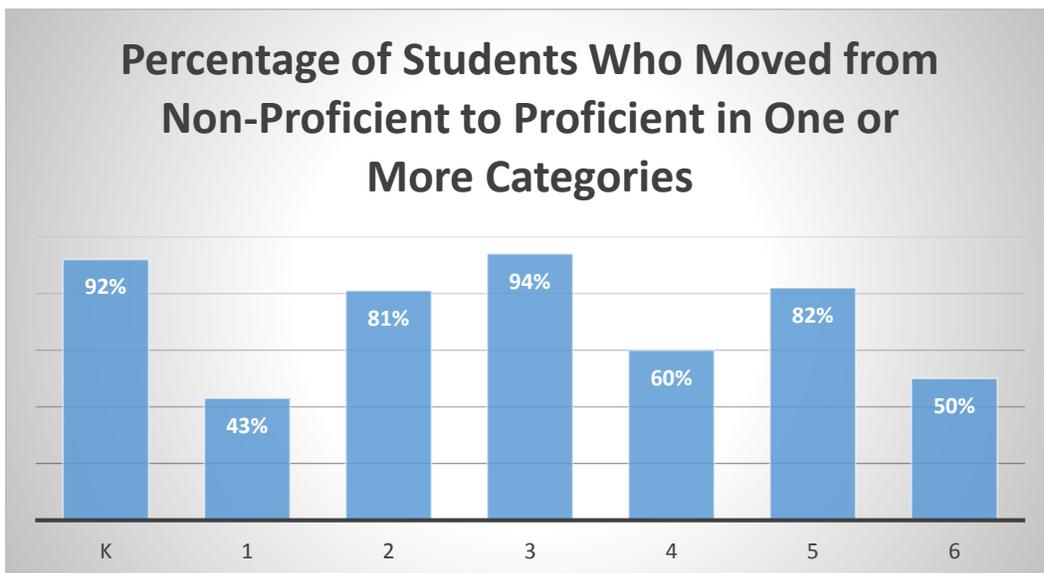


Figure 3: Movement from Non-proficient to Proficient

When analyzing student writing using the NVACS writing rubric and scoring five different aspects of the writing, not all students became proficient in all areas. However, many did cross the line moving from non-proficient to proficient scores in at least one category. (See Figure 14.)

## **Conclusion**

A district-wide initiative with a specific focus, but no specified curricular materials, may produce student gains in writing. A district-wide initiative in which curricular materials are provided, but no professional development, may or may not produce results. The initiative in Humboldt County where teachers were provided carefully chosen, well-researched curricular materials focused on building teacher capacity, paired with consistent professional development, produced exceptional results.