REPORT OF

The National Commission on Writing

FOR AMERICA'S FAMILIES, SCHOOLS, AND COLLEGES

MAY 2006

Writing and School Reform

including

The Neglected "R"

THE NEED FOR A WRITING REVOLUTION

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The National Commission on Writing

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How should the United States tackle the challenge of doubling the amount of time students spend writing? That was one of several daunting goals established in the April 2003 report of the National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges, *The Neglected "R": The Need for a Writing Revolution.* The report declared "writing today is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many." The question of what would be required to improve writing and double the amount of time spent on it framed a yearlong seminar for the Commission and its National Advisory Panel.

The seminar consisted of five hearings held in different regions of the United States in 2004. The Commission was forced to cancel a sixth hearing scheduled for Cambridge, Massachusetts, early in 2005 due to a severe snowstorm. At the five hearings, teachers, school administrators, university faculty, and academic leaders, including experts from school and campus writing programs, commented on the challenges of expanding and improving writing instruction.

To those who participated, the Commission extends its thanks. For those who could not participate, this document summarizes what the Commission heard during these five conversations.

Background

In an effort to focus national attention on the importance of teaching and learning writing, the College Board established the National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges in September 2002. The decision to create the Commission grew, in part, from the College Board's plans to offer a writing assessment in 2005 as part of the SAT®, but the larger motivation lay in growing concern within the education, business, and policy-making communities that the quality of writing in the United States was not what it should be. Although a great deal of good work is taking place in classrooms (in writing and other subjects), the consensus was clear: Writing skills need to be improved if students are to succeed in school, college, and life.

Proceeding from those premises, the Commission has been very active. Since 2002, it has accomplished a great deal. In addition to *The Neglected "R,"* which outlined a "writing agenda for the nation," the Commission launched three follow-on efforts (see Sidebar A). The first was made up of a two-part research program to gauge the extent to which writing is considered an essential skill in the world of work. The second was a public awareness

campaign. The third was an outreach activity: a series of meetings with educators from K–12 and higher education about the implications of implementing the recommendations in *The Neglected "R."* This report summarizes what the Commission heard during those hearings.

SIDEBAR A: THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON WRITING

Following release of *The Neglected "R"* in 2003, the Commission launched three follow-on activities. The first was a research effort to examine the importance of writing in the world of work. The second and third consisted of a public awareness campaign and an outreach effort to meet with educators around the United States to explore what would be involved in implementing the Commission's recommendations. This report summarizes what the Commission heard.

The research consisted of surveys of human resources and personnel officials in both large American corporations and state government. A survey of 120 major American businesses affiliated with the Business Roundtable was completed and published in September 2004. These corporations employ nearly 8 million people in the United States. The Commission's report on the survey, *Writing: A Ticket to Work…Or a Ticket Out,* concluded that in the modern world, writing is a "threshold skill" for hiring and promotion among salaried (i.e., professional) employees. Corporate responses left little doubt that writing is a ticket to professional opportunity, while poorly written applications are a figurative kiss of death for job seekers. The report, also provided to Congress, concluded that fixing writing deficiencies on the job costs American corporations as much as $3.1 billion annually.

The second survey was completed with the assistance of the National Governors Association with the cooperation and leadership of Governor Mark Warner of Virginia and Governor Mike Huckabee of Arkansas. *Writing: A Powerful Message from State Government* was submitted to Congress in July 2005. It reiterated many of the themes first noted in the Business Roundtable survey. Despite the high value that state employers place on writing skills and generally high levels of educational attainment of state employees compared to the general workforce, about 30 percent of professional employees fail to meet state writing expectations.

Each of these reports generated major newspaper coverage in the United States, with between 300 and 400 newspapers carrying initial Associated Press stories and many other follow-on stories in newspapers such as the *New York Times,* the *Washington Post,* the *Christian Science Monitor,* and the *Guardian* and *Herald Tribune,* both published in Europe.

The public awareness campaign relied on public service announcements involving sports broadcaster Bob Costas and Garfield the Cat, a cartoon character. Emphasizing the importance of writing in every career, Costas noted that although a lot of his work involves "ad lib" comments, "one of the most important aspects of my job is being able to write." Garfield, the lazy, cynical animal sprung from the comic imagination of cartoonist Jim Davis, made the point that even cartoons start with writing. These public service announcements reached millions of Americans with a simple message: Practically everything you see and hear starts with writing; writing is much more important than you think.

In addition to these activities, the Commission presented annual awards for "extraordinary contributions to the art and craft of writing" to Senator Thad Cochran of Mississippi, Senator Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia, and investor Warren E. Buffett.

All of the Commission's reports, including those based on the surveys conducted with the Business Roundtable and the National Governors Association, can be found at http://www.writingcommission.org.

COMMISSION HEARINGS

The outreach activity consisted of five hearings held around the United States in 2004. These were hearings in the sense that the Commission listened to what experts in the field had to say. Unlike congressional or judicial proceedings, however, these were informal meetings. No testimony was prepared in advance. Participants were invited to participate not as witnesses but as colleagues. The hearings were more in the nature of a seminar among experts and practitioners than the formal presentation of evidence.

The hearings were held at the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (Washington, D.C.), the Haas Foundation (San Francisco, California), Alcorn State University (Alcorn State, Mississippi), the annual convention of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) (Indianapolis, Indiana), and The University of Texas (Austin, Texas).

During these meetings, the Commission and the advisory panel heard from more than 100 local teachers and school administrators, university leaders, and directors of academic writing programs (see Hearing Attendees, page 32). The variety of people involved during these meetings was quite intentional. Across the five meetings, the mix included schoolteachers, principals, district superintendents, state department of education officials, curriculum coordinators, two- and four-year college and university faculty, admissions directors, program heads and department chairs, deans, provosts and presidents, and officers and staff of national education associations.

The discussions were animated and instructive. What the Commission wanted to understand was how to take the most effective writing instruction that is available to some students and make it widely available to all. In pursuit of that larger issue, the conversation ranged over how to:

- make writing central to the school reform agenda;
- ensure that curriculum in schools provides the necessary time for students to use writing to learn and to learn to write;
- advance writing assessment that is fair and authentic;
- guarantee that students have access to, and opportunities to compose with, current technologies, including digital technologies; and
- provide comprehensive professional development for all teachers to improve classroom practice.

At each of these gatherings, these discussions were launched after participants watched a series of video clips of effective school practice in the teaching and learning of writing (see Sidebar B). The clips covered a wide range. They addressed first-grade students and students in high school. They looked at writing from the point of view of the diverse array of students in American schools. They explored the use of technology in expanding opportunities for students from different communities to learn from each other. And they examined the use of stories, diaries, multimedia projects, oral histories, and other genres in the development of writing. The video clips generated considerable and substantial comments.

SIDEBAR B: VIDEO HIGHLIGHTS OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOL PRACTICE

At each of the hearings, participants commented on video clips of students and teachers using stories, diaries, multimedia projects, and essays and analyses to advance their learning. Several of the clips came from the Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury College, Vermont. Others came from the Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE) at the University of California: Santa Cruz; from the National Council of Teachers of English; and from Digital Underground Story Telling for Youth (D.U.S.T.Y.), a program associated with the University of California: Berkeley. Bread Loaf supports best practice in teaching writing in schools across the nation. CREDE advocates five research-based standards for effective teaching and learning in writing. D.U.S.T.Y. is an after-school program encouraging students in Oakland to create their own stories using computers, text, graphics, music, and movies.

Among the video clips participants watched were the following:

- A remarkably composed first-grade student provided a tour of her classroom, in the process describing herself and her classmates as writers with published stories, most illustrated by the students and laminated and bound with the help of the teacher.
- A “bilingual” 7-year-old girl composing her own multimedia presentation, complete with pictures, voice-over, and music, explaining how much she valued her family, her community, and her visits to her extended family in El Salvador.
- High school students from New Mexico (where uranium is mined) and South Carolina (where it is processed) exchanged information about the processes, potential, and pitfalls of nuclear energy and what uranium meant in their local communities.
- A Tlingit high school student recorded the history of her Alaskan Native people from her grandmother, a written oral history project that helped preserve village tradition and language and provided the student with new meaning in her studies.
- A “trilingual” high school immigrant from Albania describing the challenge of using school computers to communicate with students in Spanish, a process complicated for him in that he had to process both English and Spanish through his native Albanian.

The students were compelling, and their stories were powerful.

During the period of the Commission's hearings, and quite independent of the Commission and its activities, a major change in American schools was also under way. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), signed into law by President George W. Bush in January 2002, began to make its first stirrings in the 2002-03 school year as regulations to implement it were developed, discussed, and finalized. The statute placed the power of the federal government behind a new agenda of standards, annual assessment, accountability, and school choice.

As the Commission began its hearings in 2004, the full impact of the changes required by the new legislation was becoming increasingly apparent to most educators. Inevitably the discussion about the Commission's reform agenda became entangled in the larger set of questions revolving around No Child Left Behind. While the Commission was advancing recommendations grounded in writing, the personalization of instruction, and curricula that advance learning based on reflective and critical thinking, schools were struggling with national mandates for additional assessment and testing. Much of the subtext for the discussions at the hearings revolved around questions that were occasionally explicit, but mostly unspoken. Where was the time to be found for the Commission's recommendations? Could the two agendas be reconciled? When push came to shove, was it realistic to expect that schools would ignore national mandates (and the financial inducements and potential penalties attached to them) in favor of the Commission's preferences (which arrived with no money and no power to compel anyone to do anything)?

Against that complex backdrop, seven clear messages came through from the field:

- Many excellent examples of effective practice in writing instruction exist.
- Standardization and scripting of instruction threaten to undermine this writing instruction.
- A climate to encourage writing must be created.
- Genuine reform requires personalization of instruction.
- Maintaining a sense of "community" in schools is essential both to writing and to the larger reform movement.
- Integrating writing into the reform agenda, while challenging, is integral to the success of both.
- The best hope for improving both writing and schools generally lies in high-quality professional development.

Effective Practice

The broad consensus at the hearings was firm. The activities illustrated in the video clips represent excellent examples of effective practice in writing instruction. A lot of outstanding work exists on which to build. Participants immediately commented on how the teachers in the videos used writing as a tool to guide learning, shape analysis, encourage personal growth, and extend learning possibilities through technology.

A member of the Commission's National Advisory Panel, Patricia Lambert Stock, Professor, Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures; English; and Education at Michigan State University (and former president of the National Council of Teachers of English), summarized hearings participants' responses during a September 2005 keynote address to the National Adolescent Literacy Coalition. Participants noted, said Stock, that the instructional practices observed in the videos:

- encouraged students to bring the languages, experiences, and images of their home communities into the classroom to be used as resources in service of student learning;
- positioned students and teachers as co-inquirers and co-learners, a process that allowed teachers to model inquiry, study, and learning for their students;
- asked students to use writing to collect, analyze, synthesize, and communicate information and opinions;
- called on students to draft, compose, and revise a variety of writings for a variety of audiences, purposes, and occasions;
- required students to use all the language arts (listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking) all at once and all together in the service of learning and sharing their ideas; and
- encouraged students to make some of their writing public beyond the classroom, so as to gain a better understanding of how literacy works in the world.

Such activities are embedded in the practice encouraged by such groups as the National Writing Project, the National Council of Teachers of English, and others (see Sidebar C).

SIDEBAR C: RESOURCES FOR BEST PRACTICE IN WRITING

Teachers and faculty members interested in improving writing can draw on many resources. Among some of the most prominent are the following:

Bread Loaf School of English (http://www.middlebury.edu/academics/blse)
The Bread Loaf School of English is a summer graduate program of Middlebury College in Vermont, with campuses in Alaska, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oxford (England), and Vermont. The Bread Loaf Teacher Network, a year-round professional learning community facilitated by technology, links the classrooms of Bread Loaf teachers and their students for collaborative work that promotes critical literacy. Currently, about 750 teachers and several thousand students are active members of the network.

Conference on College Composition and Communication (http://www.ncte.org/groups/cccc)
CCCC, a conference of the National Council of Teachers of English, supports the teaching and study of college composition and communication by (1) sponsoring meetings and publishing scholarly materials; (2) supporting a wide range of research on composition, communication, and rhetoric; (3) working to enhance teaching conditions to promote professional development; and (4) acting as an advocate for language and literacy education nationally and internationally.

Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (http://www.cal.org/crede)
For a decade, CREDE has explored the educational needs of culturally diverse student populations. Its research on language learning opportunities highlights exemplary program choices; effective professional development practices for teachers, paraprofessionals, and principals; and the interaction of family, peers, and community on education and learning. In recent years, it has examined several focus areas, including language learning and academic achievement as well as professional development and teacher education for diversity.

Digital Underground Story Telling for Youth (http://www.oaklanddusty.org)
D.U.S.T.Y. is an after-school program for middle school students in West Oakland, California. The students work on computers to create their own digital stories, using software such as Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Premiere, and iMovie. At the end of each semester, the students' stories are shown at the Parkway Theatre in downtown Oakland. The program emphasizes one-to-one relationships between children and youth and University of California: Berkeley undergraduate tutors and mentors. It also combines traditional literacy activities with popular culture.

National Council of Teachers of English (http://www.ncte.org)
NCTE is committed to improving writing instruction for all students. It provides extensive information on writing and writing instruction, and it has developed position statements on effective writing and writing assessment at all levels of education; on the language and writing needs of English-language learners; and on the preparation and professional development of writing teachers.

National Writing Project (http://www.writingproject.org)
NWP is a professional development model with 195 university-based sites in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Each of these sites conducts annual summer institutes attended by the most experienced teachers in the area. These teachers prepare for leadership roles by demonstrating their most effective practices, studying research materials, and improving their knowledge of writing by becoming writers themselves. They bring their new knowledge and skills back to schools, for the benefit of students and fellow teachers. NWP sites serve over 100,000 teachers annually and have served an estimated one million teachers since the inception of the program as a single site in California in 1974.

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Teachers & Writers Collaborative (http://www.twc.org)
The Teachers & Writers Collaborative is one of the oldest and most innovative writers-in-the-schools programs in the United States. T&W places writers in schools and publishes books and a magazine on teaching writing—materials that provide sound theory and practical curriculum ideas for classroom teachers. Convinced that the needs for effective ways to teach writing (and for programs that support innovative teaching) are greater than ever, T&W is committed to linking the nation's large and diverse literary community with its public schools.

As Stock informed the National Adolescent Literacy Coalition, these practices rest on a solid base of research that emerged from all corners of the academy during the second half of the twentieth century, from pioneering work in fields as diverse as anthropology, classics, cognitive psychology cultural studies, economics, history, linguistics, philosophy of science, and sociology, to name a few. Directing attention to the fields of education and language and literacy studies, Stock noted the explosion in research since the 1959 Woods Hole Conference on curriculum development and the 1966 Dartmouth Seminar on the teaching and learning of English. This work helped displace a view of curriculum as something constructed of incremental building blocks and a view of the English language arts as something that is passive and focused on product. Woods Hole drew attention to the benefits of a spiral curriculum in which concepts are introduced to students in increasingly complex activities across their education. The Dartmouth Seminar drew attention to learners' use of the language arts to construct meaning—a process that is active, pays as much attention to process as product, and is grounded in the conviction that language is not simply a means of encouraging literacy but the foundation of all learning.

The first message from the hearings was strong. Good practices exist. They rest on a solid research base. We know what to do. The challenge for the hearings was best expressed by Richard Sterling, executive director of the National Writing Project and chair of the National Advisory Panel. Despite the existence of solid models of how to proceed, Sterling observed, writing is often poorly taught. The reality is that a lot of writing instruction is perfunctory. Then he posed the major question: "What would it take to turn exceptional writing instruction into everyday classroom practice?" The remaining messages responded to that question.

Customized Learning in an Age of Standardization

The task of taking the nineteenth-century invention known as the American school and transforming it into a national asset for the twenty-first century is compelling. Participants openly argued that American schools are a nineteenth-century creation, one that emerged in a specific historical milieu and society. National, state, and local leaders have massaged that invention for decades, but the escalating pace of global and domestic change requires thinking anew about the shape and function of American schools. Instead of thinking anew, several participants suggested, American policymakers are looking to the past for guidance. Far from respecting the modern world's need for flexibility, they argued, curriculum has been rigidly atomized into imposing lists of discrete standards, by subject matter. Standards have turned into standardization. Accountability has emphasized what will be tested, not what should be learned.

The conventional wisdom embedded in the current standards-based reform response found little favor in these meetings. Although university leaders and administrators were largely silent on this issue, K–12 teachers and administrators—frequently supported by university writing program directors—were nearly universal in expressing misgivings about the new approaches. The view expressed by these participants was uncompromising: Standardization of curriculum and scripting of instruction devalue teaching and diminish opportunities to embed best writing practice in the classroom.

Teachers were particularly sensitive to a public discussion that assaults their sense of self and overlooks the complexity of what they do. "Very few teachers wake up in the morning determined to damage children," said Valerie Taylor (Texas) at the Austin meeting. "Reform should value what teachers know," she said, "not impose scripted solutions on them. Reform should reflect the complexity of the challenge, instead of pretending the answers are simple."

Taylor spoke for many. Other teachers like Olivia Pass (Louisiana), Renee Moore (Mississippi), Christy Growt (Texas), Kevin Buddhu and M. Clare LePell (California), Martha Coleman (Virginia), and Joseph Bellino (Maryland) were united in sharing

concerns about the conventional wisdom represented by today's school reforms. "Top-down standards create problems," said a California teacher. "We are being driven by off-the-shelf scripted programs." A teacher in Washington, D.C., reported: "Standardized tests impede our ability to do what needs to be done in teaching writing." This complaint was echoed by others. "Students are sleepwalking through school, even with this new emphasis on standards," it was argued in Washington. "We need high-visibility, project-based work that truly engages them."

David Ward, former chancellor and president of the University of Wisconsin and president of the American Council on Education, captured the essence of this part of the conversation: "The interesting challenge posed by the Commission's writing agenda," he suggested, "is that you're suggesting we need to customize learning in an age of standardization." He asked: "How do you propose to do that?"

A Climate to Encourage Writing

At the very first hearing in Washington, D.C., largely in response to Ward's question, participants agreed that schools and communities need to create a climate in which writing can flourish. This message was articulated and repeated throughout the hearings.

Part of what is required is already well along outside school walls. With the advent of telecommunications, the Internet, blogs, and e-mail, notes author William Zinsser, "All those people who said they hate writing and can't write and don't want to write can write and do want to write. In fact, they can't be turned off. Never have so many Americans written so profusely and with so few inhibitions."

The same cannot be said within the schoolhouse. The hearings documented strong feelings about the state of writing in American schools today. A cacophony of complaints and challenges tumbled out. In the current climate, it's not clear that policymakers or educators are convinced of the importance of writing. Too often the standards-based movement ignores writing entirely. Teachers, struggling with over 150 students a day and 50-minute classroom periods, are hard-pressed to emphasize writing. In the short run, writing takes a backseat to the effort to move NCLB's Adequate Yearly Progress benchmarks under the federal impetus for assessment and accountability. Second-language learners are given

short shrift—in their own language and in English. Proposals to require writing across the curriculum intimidate teachers outside English and language arts departments. Policymakers, unfamiliar with what teachers need in order to teach writing effectively, too frequently distrust the profession.

Responding to these realities in the effort to advance writing is often easier said than done, argued participants. Writing is always demanding work, even for accomplished writers. Kevin Buddhu, an English teacher from Castro Valley's Adolfo Camarillo High School in California, put it this way: "Writing is not just saying something. It's acquiring a process by which to think about what to say." The great wit Robert Benchley once noted that he found writing easy. He just sat down at a typewriter and typed whatever occurred to him. "Writing is easy," he noted, "it's the occurring that's hard." Benchley and Buddhu share a common understanding—the process and insights required to say something meaningful (whether something serious or something comical) lie at the heart of good writing. Larry Faulkner, president of the University of Texas at Austin and a member of the National Commission, put it this way: "Writing is thinking on paper."

"Acquiring a process by which to think about what to say" often depends on teams, noted Jerrie Cobb Scott of the University of Memphis at the Mississippi meeting. "Good writing teachers often teach students how to work in pairs or teams," said Scott. "That's not something we can assume will happen naturally in the traditional classroom. We have to prepare students to work together and to learn from each other."

M. Clare LePell, English teacher and department chair at Castro Valley High School in California, pointed out that the success of one of the examples illustrated in the video clips (a technology-enabled exchange of student research and data between sites in South Carolina and New Mexico) "depended on a positive environment in which the students could discuss and reflect on their ideas before writing them down."

Writing doesn't just happen, according to Buddhu. It's a developed skill. As he said, "Many students see writing as something they have to do, not as something meaningful." Whether in Washington, San Francisco, Indianapolis, Alcorn State, or Austin, participants agreed that if writing is to be meaningful, it has to be more than something students are required to do. Schools (and policymakers) have to create a climate to encourage it.

Personalization of Instruction

Training children or adults to exercise isolated skills or simple procedures can be done by the numbers. Unfortunately, educating children or adults to meet the complex demands of modern life cannot be carried out that way. Genuine teaching and learning are intensely personal, not scripted, participants agreed. They take place when minds engage around substance. Research confirms that learning is always academically rigorous and relevant—and individualized in the sense that it connects students with adults in work designed to meet young people's academic and developmental needs.

It seemed clear during the hearings that many educators on the front lines believe much of today's reform movement works against learning environments incorporating these features.

In the past, the best schools placed great emphasis on writing. Grammar, rhetoric, and logic (saying things properly, saying them well, and saying them in a way that makes sense) were seen as cornerstones of powerful educational strategies. Exclusive private schools continue to rely on them. The valuable tool of writing must be put back in the hands of schoolteachers, not because writing is an optional talent that students might find useful at some point in their lives, but because writing (and the conceptual skills it reflects and develops) opens up new and powerful means of learning for all students.

It was very clear during the hearings that the tradition of analytic and expository writing continues to be highly valued by academics. Directors of admissions, deans, provosts, and university presidents spoke of the importance of such writing. Larry Faulkner noted that his institution and others across the country spend large amounts of money annually, providing remedial instruction in writing for incoming students.

As participants discussed video clips demonstrating the power of personal experience as a resource to help students write and learn, they noted how this writing led students to compose the kind of expository and analytic writing that all participants indicated they valued. For example, many teachers commented on the video clip cited above showing interactions between high school students in New Mexico and South Carolina. The experiences of the students' families in mining uranium (New Mexico), and processing it (South Carolina), brought home the complexities involved with this hazardous material in ways that no amount of formal study could.

Another video clip captured the story of a young Tlingit high school girl who recorded and described her grandmother's story. The girl's grandmother struggled to hold on to a sense of cultural identity in the face of Alaska's efforts to stamp out Tlingit culture and language. The young woman's deep emotional connection with her grandmother, and her newfound appreciation for the culture this elderly woman had helped preserve, evoked universal admiration during the hearings. To the participants, this clip demonstrated the motivational power of personalized instruction at its best.

As Tom McKenna of the Alaska State Writing Consortium noted during the Indianapolis meeting, "This young woman takes the notion of writing and makes it personal and culturally relevant. Her grandmother's story is powerful. The community needs to hear it. And, as the student herself said, the writing gave her a reason to come to school and value herself. For the first time she realized, 'I matter.'"

A Sense of Community

At the outset of the San Francisco hearing, Norton Grubb, professor of education at the University of California: Berkeley, offered the following observation about the Commission and its activities: "Any position on writing that comes out of this work needs to be situated in a description of a more engaging and constructive school community. Then writing can be an element of knowledge building and knowledge sharing."

This view enjoyed widespread approval in San Francisco and subsequent hearings. Far from being punitive or judgmental, said participants, a climate for writing creates a community, an environment that is safe and respectful, for students and teachers alike.

Communities of learning hold the promise of transforming the school culture from one of disciplinary silos in "egg-carton schools" to a model based on professional communities of practice, participants suggested. They repeatedly endorsed such an approach. Local sites of the National Writing Project and the Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury College (Vermont) teacher network are examples of such communities. Digital Underground Story Telling for Youth (D.U.S.T.Y.), an after-school program for middle school students in West Oakland, California, which provided one of the video clips, is another example. (Sidebar C provides brief descriptions of all three organizations.) Such efforts aim to help transform writing practice by establishing collective responsibility for what students learn. Ideally, every American school would model such behavior.

It needs to be emphasized that both students and teachers benefit from such approaches. Although much of the discussion around school reform is about student change, the real benefits for students cannot be realized unless teachers can grow and develop as well, according to the hearings participants. The goal should not be something vague, high-minded, and general—such as reform, standards, accountability, or change. It should be the creation of a community in which students can learn because teachers have been empowered to teach.

At the University of California: Los Angeles (UCLA), said Sidnie Myrick, codirector of that campus's Writing Project, interdisciplinary assignments are emphasized as a means of building a sense of community in schools. "Subject-area faculty, however, are frequently afraid to have their students' writing shared with English teachers," she reported. It's an interesting dilemma, said Myrick. As students, social studies and biology teachers might have worried about being poor writers themselves. Persuading them, as teachers, to write or to emphasize writing can be difficult. So, said Myrick, "We spend a lot of time building up a sense of community—a sense that the barriers between subjects and writing need to be torn down."

In participants' discussions, a promising portrait emerged outlining how writing instruction might serve to build communities of learning and practice that connect schools to families, as well as to teaching across subject areas within schools and teaching across levels of instruction within the profession.

Integrating Writing into the Reform Agenda

The need to integrate writing into the reform agenda was a value widely shared during these hearings. Many participants, however, believed that achieving this desirable goal would be highly challenging. David Pearson, dean of the graduate school of education at the University of California: Berkeley, for example, asked: "Even if we developed a model for writing instruction and assessment, how would it fit in a school district that is under severe pressure from No Child Left Behind?"

The hearings left no doubt that although standards and accountability may be sound goals, the strategies pursued to achieve them leave a lot to be desired. In particular, the combined emphases on curriculum alignment and discrete skills come at a high cost. Teachers at the hearings complained, as noted above, about inflexibility and lack

of time to integrate writing into instruction. They worried that pressure to conform to accountability requirements around NCLB's Adequate Yearly Progress will leave them unable to find the time to develop complex problem-solving strategies (including writing) that are not susceptible to testing. At all the hearings, but particularly in San Francisco and Austin, participants voiced dismay that the needs of English-language learners might be overlooked in the press for standardization.

The Commission believes that an integrated system of standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment is desirable and needs to be developed. This integrated and demanding system should make room for writing as a key instructional strategy in all subject areas while clearly communicating high expectations for student performance.

Key to the development of this integrated system should be addressing a complaint the Commission heard throughout its meetings: Existing state standards and assessment systems frequently constrain schools and teachers from best practice in teaching, specifically in writing instruction. Jayne Marlink, director of the California Writing Project, described state officials' frustration with how assessment is driving instruction. "I have been meeting with staff at the California Department of Education who are frustrated with how their own assessments are driving writing instruction. What I pointed out to them is that instruction has defaulted to teaching the few principles that are tested. There's no room left in the curriculum for interdisciplinary projects that are so valuable from the point of view of writing."

A panel made up of teachers and state and local officials brought a consensus judgment back to the meeting at Alcorn State University: "All of this sounds unreachable to those teachers who are told that if their students don't accomplish certain scores on state assessments, they'll lose their jobs. This pressure turns teachers into 'test pushers.' These mandates come down from the state level. They wind up choking writing because teachers are told 'don't waste kids' time on it.'"

Need for Professional Development

Top-down mandates for school improvement put the cart before the horse. It defies common sense to conclude that teachers who devote their lives to education are indifferent to learning. Who really believes that teachers care less about students (and know less about how to teach) than people who have never set foot in a classroom? At best, however,

the dynamics of school reform in the United States pay only lip service to teachers' views. At worst, they often rest on a foundation of teacher baiting.

School reform cannot be imposed on the profession. If the United States is to close the achievement gap, it will be done with the collaboration and leadership of the nation's 2.5 million teachers or it will not be done at all. Everything experts understand about the change process in the private sector applies in schools as well: The workforce must "own" the change.

An impressive consensus developed at these hearings about the importance of professional development for teachers. In this case, the impetus was professional development around writing, but it seemed clear that participants supported the broadest possible conception of professional development to help teachers meet the challenges before them.

In San Francisco, Phil Sittnick, a teacher from New Mexico who had participated in the Bread Loaf program, asked a challenging question: "Why aren't more teachers delivering the kinds of instruction we see on these videos? It's because teacher preparation shows teachers how to deliver curricula, not how to develop it. These projects require teachers to develop and design instructional approaches, and very few teachers have been prepared to do such work."

The reality, said John Trimble, professor of English and rhetoric at the University of Texas at Austin, also confirms Richard Sterling's comments about the quality of a lot of writing instruction. Too much writing instruction is formulaic and mediocre, according to Trimble. "Students are confronted with prohibitions about not using 'I,' avoiding contractions, and never starting a sentence with 'and'—although first-rate writers violate these taboos every day. Students are subjected to a lot of boring assignments. Most teachers wouldn't want to complete their own assignments. Then teachers turn into picky martinets instead of serving as a good audience for the student's work."

Lyn Ikoma, a member of the Commission from California's Chatsworth Senior High School, suggested that lack of support and ongoing professional development was encouraging some of the most able new teachers to leave the profession. Her comment elicited a response from James Hahn, curriculum coordinator of California's Pittsburg Unified School District. Acknowledging that writing instruction may be an effective long-term

solution to learning needs, he pointed out that it's hard to get principals and policymakers to invest in it. "Policy commitments are targeted at math and science instruction," he noted. "No Child Left Behind plays out at the lowest common denominator, which is Adequate Yearly Progress." Then he suggested that the professional development requirements in NCLB might point the way to a solution: "Principals don't even focus on the professional development requirements in the law. Perhaps that's a place to start."

Title II of No Child Left Behind does in fact provide a legislative mechanism for accomplishing much of the professional development agenda. It includes an impressively knowledgeable and detailed list of what will be required to upgrade professional development for teachers and principals. It provides for teacher mentoring, team teaching, and reduced class schedules. It offers opportunities to develop innovative strategies for intensive professional development. Title II, in brief, if properly funded, provides many things that advocates of professional development have long believed were educationally essential.

Once again a panel at Alcorn State University put a lot of this in perspective. The group concluded: "We need to get serious about professional development. Teachers need to model themselves as writers to create enthusiasm in students. They need time (as part of their job) to discuss issues with their colleagues. They need time to keep up with the research on learning and to reflect on best practice. Professional development needs to support this approach to improving teaching."

THE ROAD AHEAD

During the past year, a number of analyses have been produced indicating that American schools have made some limited progress in terms of student achievement since public demand for higher standards began to be heard two decades ago. What these analyses also underscore is the difficulty of properly implementing and sustaining new innovations. Scaling up promising practice is a huge challenge, no matter what the practice sets out to do.

As a recent report (*Expanding the Reach of Education Reforms*) from RAND Corporation, a not-for-profit research organization, indicates there are no "silver bullets." Innovators and policymakers alike need to pay attention to building the capacity to implement and sustain reform, while respecting school culture and policy and fostering a sense of ownership at the local level. The process of building reform and going to scale is complex and iterative, requiring cooperation among many actors, all of whom have to act in concert if tangible results are to be expected.

In that context, the hearings described here take on new meaning. The explicit and implicit criticisms heard throughout these meetings about the approaches embedded in No Child Left Behind reveal practitioners' skepticism about the wisdom of trying to impose a top-down solution on the diversity of American schools. At the same time, the imposition of national standards on local educators and federal demands for accountability fly in the face of the research conclusion that innovations need to respect school culture and local ownership. It is clear that not all the actors are working together, a prerequisite for solid results, according to research on successful implementation of innovation.

This situation clearly requires attention as both the writing reform agenda and the larger standards-based reform agenda move forward.

The hearings did not leave the Commission without some guidance on how best to proceed with a writing agenda. Although hearings participants were not asked to comment in detail on the recommendations laid out in *The Neglected "R,"* the consensus during the hearings endorsed many of those recommendations (see Sidebar D). Indeed in several areas, the hearings consensus took the Commission to task for overlooking significant challenges in improving writing. The needs of English-language learners had not received sufficient attention. The importance of multidisciplinary projects as a means of encouraging team building and community in schools had been overlooked. And *The Neglected "R"* seemed to consider technology largely as a tool for advancing traditional writing and assessment instead of understanding that video and multimedia projects enabled students to find new ways not only to communicate with their audiences but to understand the world around them.

SIDEBAR D: HEARING REACTIONS TO THE COMMISSION'S RECOMMENDATIONS

Hearing participants, encouraged to think about extending best practice, inevitably touched on most of the Commission's key recommendations. The Commission suggested a "writing agenda for the nation" made up of four key components. The comparison below outlines the recommendations and consensus agreement where it appeared to exist.

RECOMMENDATIONS: THE NEGLECTED "R"	Consensus Agreement During Hearings (X)
A Writing Agenda that Includes:	
Comprehensive writing policy in state standards	X
Doubling the amount of time spent writing	X
Additional state and local financial support	X
Writing in all subjects and all grade levels	X
Required writing preservice for teaching license	X
A White House Conference on Writing	
Improved writing instruction for undergraduates	X
Time	
Double the amount of time students spend writing.	X
Double resources devoted to writing instruction.	
Assign writing across the curriculum.	X
Encourage out-of-school writing.	X
Encourage parents to review children's writing.	
Teachers and Professional Development	
Requirement of writing across subjects and grades	X
Developmentally appropriate writing for all students, from kindergarten through college	X
Common expectations for writing across disciplines	
In-service workshops to help teachers understand writing and develop as writers	X
Professional development for university faculty to improve student writing	
University–school partnerships to improve writing for English-language learners	X
Technology	
Create a National Educational Technology Trust to finance technology and training.	
Employ technology to help improve writing.	X
Apply technology to the grading and assessment of writing.	
Measuring Results	
Assessment of writing competence must be fair and authentic.	X
Standards, curriculum, and assessment must be aligned in reality as well as in rhetoric.	
Assessments of student writing must go beyond multiple-choice, machine-scored items.	X
Assessment should provide students with adequate time to write.	X
Assessment should require students to actually create a piece of prose.	
Best writing assessment should be more widely replicated.	X

Despite such misgivings, hearings participants offered the Commission many suggestions on how to move ahead. The guidance came in two broad areas: how to integrate writing into the reform agenda and how to create and support productive learning communities and personalized instruction through new and improved professional development.

Integrating Writing into the Reform Agenda. The Commission received explicit advice during the hearings about how to ensure that writing is not overlooked in the standards-based reform movement. Participants suggested that writing advocates *develop a clear statement for teachers* that describes what good writing looks like across grade levels. The statement should encompass descriptive, creative, and analytical writing, different genres, and different methodologies, including student journaling, the use of technology, and multimedia presentations. While participants agreed on the need for writing with a strong conceptual and analytical foundation, they also stressed that such writing begins with assignments that draw on the real world and are related to the communities in which students live and work.

In the effort to make writing a *more central element in the reform effort,* the Commission was urged to bring other partners to the table. Curriculum standards are defined not by disciplinary groups but by state and local bodies. While disciplinary advice is often key, it is also the case that a lot of standards-setting activities are political exercises in which the loudest advocates receive the greatest attention. One suggestion was for writing advocates to establish partnerships with other school and community organizations, including higher education, to encourage best practice and bring it to scale.

“Capstone” presentations, i.e., student demonstrations of competence following intensive study or project development, were one of the favored strategies for integrating writing into the broader reform movement. Through the use of written reports, videos, or multimedia presentations and public performances, students can demonstrate their mastery of complex problems and situations.

Two other strategies also received a lot of attention: “writing across the curriculum” and team projects. Too frequently, writing is seen as an academic skill that is the responsibility of English or language arts teachers. Insisting on the widespread use of writing across

curriculum areas, including mathematics and science, holds the promise of improving students' writing competence, deepening subject-matter knowledge, and expanding the amount of time students spend writing. Meanwhile, to engage student interest in writing (and dispel fears about formulaic and perfunctory writing instruction), participants urged greater emphasis on student teams working on multidisciplinary projects, which should require written or multimedia project reports.

At the same time, writing *assessment* requires attention. Leaders of the writing movement need to encourage policymakers to move beyond traditional assessment techniques to incorporate multiple types of assessments and performances (integrated with standards) as evidence of student ability (e.g., graduation projects and portfolios, and speech, debate, and public performances).

The imperative to think about bringing *technology* more fully into the writing discussion also received a lot of attention in the hearings. Technologically enabled projects permit students to work with students in other locations, explore their local surroundings, and gauge the quality of their performance and the level of their skill against peers elsewhere. The Commission was also encouraged to advocate building on students' fascination with "blogging" and "instant messaging" to help develop writing competence.

The needs of *English-language learners* were a high-visibility concern everywhere, but particularly in Texas and California, which both enroll large numbers of English-language learners in their public schools. As the Commission stressed in *The Neglected "R,"* these students are one of the fastest growing populations in the United States. Virtually everyone agreed on the importance of an approach that combined high expectations for what English-language learners can achieve with respect for the language resources these students bring to the classroom. Participants also stressed the importance of responding to the special needs of English-language learners in assessment. They also emphasized the importance of encouraging these students to draw on their unique perspectives in developing their personal stories and journals. Practically all teachers require support, assistance, and professional development to help these students succeed in both their native language and English.

Improving Professional Development. If integration into the larger reform agenda was a challenging but desirable goal for most participants, stronger professional development was the preferred strategy. Scarcely an hour went by at any of the hearings without a strong plea to strengthen programs to help teachers improve writing instruction.

Recommendations in this area began with the suggestion that districts *transform professional development* by turning the responsibility and funding for it over to teachers. The sense was that professional development led by teachers can support and empower them, while grounding professional development in challenges that are immediate and relevant in the classroom. There was also a hope that teacher-led professional development emphasizing teachers as writers could show teachers how to model writing for their students and allow teachers to understand the challenges that students experience learning to write. Encouraging teachers to see themselves as writers and modeling writing for the benefit of their students were recurring themes throughout the hearings.

A related issue was the need to *embed professional development in the job.* Several times existing professional development efforts were dismissed as "drive-by" training—one-shot sessions that provide little tangible or long-term benefits to teachers. Making professional development part of the daily working lives of teachers—by providing time for it during the school schedule on a regular and recurring basis—received a lot of support during the hearings. The view was that embedding professional development in the job would encourage new ways of approaching writing (and teaching generally) by emphasizing mentoring, team teaching, and the application of emerging technologies to the improvement of writing and communication.

Mentoring as part of professional development was a common theme in the meetings. It was a major focus of requests for expanded university–school partnerships. One justification for such partnerships lay in encouraging teachers and university faculty to work together as equals in defining and sharing best practice, while remaining current on developing research. These partnerships were also recommended as a way to provide K–12 teachers with support from the academic world. And addressing alarming rates of teacher turnover among new teachers by providing more mentors for novice teachers was a suggestion that was universally applauded.

Another significant issue revolved around *time and school schedules,* particularly as time and schedules relate to classroom preparation and professional development. Where can additional time be found for the demanding work of teaching and correcting writing? Participants suggested a range of possibilities. Consider block schedules (classroom periods up to twice as long as traditional periods) as a way to break existing time bonds and offer new possibilities for arranging school time. Extend teacher contracts for a month (and the remuneration attached to them) to provide additional time for collaborative development of curriculum. Provide regular common time during the school week (as Japanese schools do) so that teachers can review student work, collaborate in improving the analysis of overall student performance, share insights into the challenges facing particular students, and integrate technology into teaching and team teaching.

Professional development around the needs of *English-language learners* was also a high priority. These students need assistance in developing writing skills in both their own language and English. Conventionally trained teachers are at a double disadvantage in trying to respond to the needs of this student population. Teachers typically have not received solid preparation or professional development for the teaching of writing. In addition, no matter how dedicated, most teachers have trouble responding to the learning needs of students struggling to learn English. The challenge for professional development around English-language learners is doubly hard.

These suggestions provide a blueprint that the Commission expects to place in front of the educational community as the larger reform movement progresses.

Next Steps

In the final analysis, it is clear that the Commission's goals for writing will not be widely adopted in schools across the United States simply based on the Commission's preferences. These goals will come to life only when schools by the thousands, teachers by the hundreds of thousands, and students by the millions take them seriously—and school leaders at the state and local level adopt them as their own.

To move its agenda forward, the Commission plans on a four-part strategy: perseverance, practice-based inquiry, public engagement, and partnerships. Each element of this strategy is designed to cement writing firmly into the school reform debate.

Perseverance. The National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges will continue its activities for the next five years. The Commission holds fast to its belief that writing should be at the top of the nation's school reform agenda because writing and communication are essential to the development of students' critical thinking skills and their ability to conceptualize and organize their own knowledge and thinking. As part of this effort, the Commission will insist that one of the emerging lessons from two decades of school reform is that improvement is slow, incremental, and builds on itself. The kind of writing revolution the Commission calls for requires time to mature. The Commission plans to devote its time to the task.

Practice-Based Inquiry. Although a great deal of excellent writing practice exists, a lot still needs to be learned about how best to improve writing in different local contexts and situations. We need to respect in writing what RAND concludes needs to be respected in the larger reform agenda—how concepts and designs are implemented at the local level. The Commission thinks of this work not as research in the experimental sense, but as a qualitative effort to develop and test practical frameworks for improving the teaching and learning of writing in the classroom. This work can help bring writing reform to scale. Urgently required are new ways of thinking about models to replicate, broaden, and deepen effective writing practice, not just for the best students, but for all students.

Public Engagement. Here the Commission wants to preach the good news. The Commission plans to continue to make sure that governors, state superintendents of instruction, and local school leaders understand the importance of writing and how it fits into the reform agenda. In the years ahead, the Commission will issue periodic reports to the writing community on best writing practice.

One encouraging sign that the general public is ready to hear the good news was produced in April 2005, when the research and communications firm of Belden, Russonello & Stewart produced a report for the National Writing Project entitled *Learning to Write, Writing to Learn: Americans' Views of Writing in Our Schools,* which was based on a national public survey. When it comes to writing, the public is ahead of its leaders. The public insists that writing should be taught early and often in schools. It believes writing belongs in all subjects. Overwhelming majorities think that writing should be a school priority and understand that writing is an important part of thinking, learning, communicating, and

succeeding in life. Nearly two-thirds agree that writing is an important ingredient in "almost any career or job." As the Commission prepares to engage the public, it will be doing so on a topic the public understands and appreciates.

Partnerships. Finally, the Commission wants to act on a recommendation that was made repeatedly during the hearings: Integrate the voices of others into the writing agenda by establishing partnerships with other school and community organizations and with higher education. In recent years, powerful coalitions of educators, sometimes supported by other groups from sectors such as the business community, have joined forces in the effort to advance educational improvement. These coalitions cut across normal boundaries separating K–12 educators from higher education, educators from community leaders, and the not-for-profit sector from the private sector. They include groups such as the Alliance for Excellence in Education, the Business Roundtable, the Committee for Economic Development, the Education Trust, the Institute for Educational Leadership, the National Adolescent Literacy Coalition, and the National High School Alliance.

Such organizations have developed the capacity over the years for bringing disparate groups together to find common solutions. The Commission plans to work with these groups to make sure that the importance of writing becomes a central element in the nation's ongoing discussion of its educational future.

How do these four strategies translate into immediate next steps for the Commission? How do we build on the comments from the public hearings and our past accomplishments? How do we coordinate our efforts with others to improve writing?

These questions helped guide the Commission as it developed plans for the next 18 months. It is our intent to pursue a four-part agenda, each part designed to support the other three. Following is a list of the four areas and initial starting points, each of which will be expanded over the next year and a half.

> **Keeping Writing in the Public Eye.** The importance of writing—for critical thinking and communication skills, for success in school and the workplace, for self-realization, and for its central place in school reform—cannot be overemphasized. And this message must be clearly disseminated time and again. Therefore, the Commission will continue to produce and distribute reports on various aspects of writing to a wide

variety of groups. This will include continuation of reports to Congress, policymakers, educators, business leaders, students and their families; targeted campaigns on the importance of writing to other select constituencies; and reports on special subject areas such as the impact of technology on writing and the teaching of writing. Two new reports are currently under way.

Getting Solid Data. To improve writing in our schools, we need a better understanding of what takes place in many classrooms. Although educators and others currently have some knowledge in this domain, both research based and anecdotal, those concerned with the improvement of writing and education more generally would profit from a more complete understanding of what our students are learning and not learning. Therefore, the Commission will help establish a three- to five-year research effort to gather data on the state of writing in America's middle and high schools.

Impacting Classroom Practice. Ultimately, the challenge to the Commission is to change classroom practice. And too much is at stake to wait for a full-blown national movement to further support teachers in their critical work. Therefore, the Commission will start to support teachers immediately. It will work with the National Writing Project, which trains approximately 100,000 teachers per year, to improve the teaching of writing.

Building the Coalition. Putting writing in its proper place in the school reform agenda requires support from a wide range of interested parties. And helping create and maintain this kind of supportive coalition must be one of the primary goals of the National Commission on Writing. Therefore, the Commission will continue to actively inform, coordinate, and build a coalition of organizations and individuals, in and outside of the writing community and in and outside of the world of education, to support the improvement of writing, literacy, education achievement, and equity.

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REPORT OF

The National Commission on Writing

FOR AMERICA'S FAMILIES, SCHOOLS, AND COLLEGES

The Neglected "R"

THE NEED FOR A WRITING REVOLUTION

CollegeBoard

APRIL 2003

The National Commission on Writing
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Writing today is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many.

The National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

American education will never realize its potential as an engine of opportunity and economic growth until a writing revolution puts language and communication in their proper place in the classroom. Writing is how students connect the dots in their knowledge. Although many models of effective ways to teach writing exist, both the teaching and practice of writing are increasingly shortchanged throughout the school and college years. Writing, always time-consuming for student and teacher, is today hard-pressed in the American classroom. Of the three "Rs," writing is clearly the most neglected.

The nation's leaders must place writing squarely in the center of the school agenda, and policymakers at the state and local levels must provide the resources required to improve writing. Here are the Commission's recommendations about what will be required to create a writing revolution and some suggestions about how to launch it:

A Writing Agenda for the Nation

- Every state should revisit its education standards to make sure they include a comprehensive writing policy.
- That policy should aim to double the amount of time most students spend writing, require a writing plan in every school district, insist that writing be taught in all subjects and at all grade levels, and require successful completion of a course in writing theory and practice as a condition of teacher licensing.
- National political leadership should put the power of the bully pulpit to work through a National Conference on Writing.
- Higher education should address the special roles it has to play in improving writing. All prospective teachers, no matter their discipline, should be provided with courses in how to teach writing. Meanwhile, writing instruction in colleges and universities should be improved for all students.
- States and the federal government should provide the financial resources necessary for the additional time and personnel required to make writing a centerpiece in the curriculum.

Time

- The amount of time students spend writing (and the scale of financial resources devoted to writing) should be at least doubled.
- Writing should be assigned across the curriculum.
- More out-of-school time should also be used to encourage writing, and parents should review students' writing with them.

Measuring Results

- Public and private leaders and assessment experts must ensure that assessment of writing competence is fair and authentic.
- Standards, curriculum, and assessment must be aligned, in writing and elsewhere in the curriculum, in reality as well as in rhetoric.
- Assessments of student writing must go beyond multiple-choice, machine-scorable items. Assessment should provide students with adequate time to write and should require students to actually create a piece of prose.
- Best practice in assessment should be more widely replicated.

Technology

- Government should extend the underlying premise of recent federal telecommunications policy by recognizing that the national technological infrastructure for education is as critical to the United States in the twenty-first century as highways were in the twentieth. They can do so by creating a National Educational Technology Trust to finance hardware, software, and training for every student and teacher in the nation.

- Private and public leaders should work with educators to apply new technologies to the teaching, development, grading, and assessment of writing.
- The nation should invest in research that explores the potential of new and emerging technologies to identify mistakes in grammar, encourage students to share their work, help assess writing samples, and incorporate software into measuring student writing competence.

Teachers and Professional Development

- Writing is everybody's business, and state and local curriculum guidelines should require writing in every curriculum area and at all grade levels.
- Writing opportunities that are developmentally appropriate should be provided to every student, from the earliest years through secondary school and into college.
- Common expectations about writing should be developed across disciplines through in-service workshops designed to help teachers understand good writing and develop as writers themselves.
- Universities should advance common expectations by requiring all prospective teachers to take courses in how to teach writing. Teachers need to understand writing as a complex (and enjoyable) form of learning and discovery, both for themselves and for their students. Faculty in all disciplines should have access to professional development opportunities to help them improve student writing.
- University–school partnerships should encourage greater experimentation and the development of new model programs to improve teaching and learning for English-language learners.

An Action Agenda

- To move this national writing agenda forward, the Commission proposes a five-year Writing Challenge for the nation and seeks the support of leaders from education, government, business, and the philanthropic world for this Challenge. The Challenge should issue progress reports, map the terrain ahead, and provide assistance to educators on the many details that remain to be ironed out on topics such as writing assessment and the use of technology.

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PREFACE

In an effort to focus national attention on the teaching and learning of writing, in September 2002, the College Board—a nonprofit membership organization composed of more than 4,300 schools and colleges—established the National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges. The decision to create the Commission was animated in part by the Board's plans to offer a writing assessment in 2005 as part of the new SAT®, but the larger motivation lay in the growing concern within the education, business, and policy-making communities that the level of writing in the United States is not what it should be. Although there is much good work taking place in our classrooms, the quality of writing must be improved if students are to succeed in college and in life. The addition of a writing component to the SAT and the establishment of a writing commission respond directly to that concern. We hope that the work of this commission and the agenda it lays out will help create a writing revolution in the United States.

The Commission, aided by an advisory panel of academic experts on writing, was made up principally of teachers, superintendents, and college and university presidents and chancellors. It was asked to define and reaffirm the central role of writing in education and to make recommendations about how students, their families, schools, colleges, and universities could improve writing quality in the United States.

During the course of its work, the Commission met to offer guidance to its staff and consultants on the major issues that should govern writing policy in the United States. It also reviewed research and policy proposals provided by the advisory panel. Commission members also agreed on the broad dimensions of what this report should say, and they provided detailed guidance about the report's main themes and recommendations.

As we went about our work, we were impressed with the energy and talent of the writing community. A lot of excellent work is under way to improve writing, at both the school and college levels. This document incorporates several examples of these efforts. We were equally impressed with how much remains to be accomplished. Of necessity, much of our discussion focuses on this unfinished work.

This Commission has no authority to impose change. Our only lever is the power of persuasion. Our role is to express the need for a cultural transformation that will improve writing in the United States. Our intention is to press for such a transformation. We intend to expand our membership into a new Writing Challenge. This new effort will be designed to support the writing community in creating a writing agenda for the nation, an agenda that provides for a comprehensive writing policy, doubles time and resources for writing, supports teachers' professional development, draws on the promise of technology, and encourages fair and authentic assessment.

We want to thank our colleagues on the Commission for their commitment to this effort and for the many thoughtful ways in which they shaped this document. Although each member would undoubtedly write a slightly different report, all of us support the broad directions outlined here. We also thank the members of the advisory panel for their hard work. We listened intently to their advice and tried to do justice to what they had to say, even if we did not always follow their suggestions to the letter.

C. Peter Magrath (Chair)
President
National Association of State Universities
and Land-Grant Colleges

Arlene Ackerman (Vice Chair)
Superintendent
San Francisco Unified School District

CHAPTER 1

The Neglected "R"

Writing, education's second "R," has become the neglected element of American school reform. The school improvement journey that began 20 years ago with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* is well begun, but it is only partly finished. In the minds of policymakers, learning improvement focuses largely on facts, discrete areas of curriculum, and educational institutions. In this Commission's view, the concept of educational reform must be expanded to include ideas; the ability of students to think, reason, and communicate; and broad community and societal support for the goals of learning. What is required is not another educational fad forced upon overworked teachers, professors, and administrators, but a fundamental reformulation of what this society means by learning and how it encourages young people to develop their full potential.

The nation's education challenge is to take a promising reform idea organized around important common expectations and the measurement of results and infuse it with energy so that schools are interesting, learning is powerful, and students become confident self-starters. A commitment to writing, not simply among educators but also among policymakers and the general public, is one of the underdeveloped ingredients. If students are to make knowledge their own, they must struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts, and rework raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can communicate to someone else. In short, if students are to learn, they must write.

The Power of Writing

When education was a private good, available to only a small elite in the United States, grammar, rhetoric, and logic were considered to be the foundation on which real learning and self-knowledge were built. That is to say, policy and pedagogy united around the proposition that how to say things correctly, how to say them well, and how to make sure that what one said made sense were important educational values. To reap the full benefits of the great democratization of learning in the United States, these three elements should still be pillars of learning.

At its best, writing has helped transform the world. Revolutions have been started by it. Oppression has been toppled by it. And it has enlightened the human condition. American life has been richer because people like Rachel Carson, César Chavez, Thomas Jefferson, and Martin Luther King, Jr., have given voice to the aspirations of the nation and its people. And it has become fuller because writers like James Baldwin, William Faulkner, Toni Morrison, and Edith Wharton have explored the range of human misery and joy. When pressed, many of us, young and old alike, still turn to pen and ink in the effort to make sense of our grief, pleasure, rage, or happiness (see "Letters at Ground Zero," below, for examples of how powerfully children can express their emotions).

Writing enriches the nation's political life as well. Few national leaders have matched the power and persuasiveness of Abraham Lincoln or Franklin D. Roosevelt as they called out to the better angels of the American nature. All of these leaders and others have used the power of words, language, and writing to remind Americans of what high standards they have set for themselves — and what these ideals mean to the rest of the world.

At a deeply practical level, writing sustains American life and popular culture in many ways that are clear and in some that are rarely noticed. Most people understand that somebody has to write a book or a short story. But there is not a movie, advertising jingle, magazine, political campaign, newspaper, theatrical production, hit record, comic book, or instructional manual that does not begin with writers and rest on writing. Popular culture and the economies of the Western world depend on writing today in ways hard to imagine even a few generations ago. Although only a few hundred thousand adults earn their living as full-time writers, many working Americans would not be able to hold their positions if they were not excellent writers. And the number of full-time writers is expected to grow faster than employment generally for the next decade.[1]

Even people who do not think of themselves as writers understand the importance of writing to their careers. More than 90 percent of midcareer professionals recently cited the "need to write effectively" as a skill "of great importance" in their day-to-day work.[2] The world in general, and advanced societies in particular, now demonstrates a nearly voracious appetite for highly educated people. To respond to it, fully three-quarters of American high school graduates enroll in an institution of higher education immediately after graduation from high school,[3] probably because they understand that college-level skills are the key to employment security in a fast-changing world. This new environment places a greater premium on the ability of the average American to communicate clearly than it ever has before. Fields like engineering emphasize the written materials, such as proposals and interim and final reports, that are essential by-products of technical work. The reward of disciplined writing is the most valuable job attribute of all: a mind equipped to think. Writing today is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many.

Queridos Bomberos, Gracias a todos los bomberos por salvar a la gente.
Yo soy Amy
(Dear Firemen, Thanks to all the firemen for saving people. I am Amy)

Dear Fireman,
My name is Cadence. I'm missing an uncle. Please find him. His name is Gonja. His family misses him. We'll keep praying for him. If he's alive and you find him tell him "Cadence and his family miss him." He was the Best uncle in the world. I feel like crying.
Love, Cadence — Grade 4

I feel sad because one of my dads best friends named Eric died.
He worked in the first twin tower.
Charlotte — Grade 2

My hero,
My pillow before a fall,
My life preserver in deep water,
My medicine during a cold,
My fuel during a race,
My jacket in cold weather,
My solution to a problem,
My help in time of need,
My family,
My very own firefighter—My Uncle Phil
Gregory — Grade 5

I've learned — that your life can be changed in a matter of minutes,
by people who don't even know you.
John — Grade 8

Look at the terrorists, they don't care
The terrorists might be here today
We must destroy them, they must pay
They have hurt us in more than one way.
Leovina — Grade 5

The time has come to fight back and we are. By supporting our leaders and each other, we are stronger than ever. We will never forget those who died, nor will we forgive those who took them from us.
Michael — High School

I've learned — that the people you care about most in life are taken from you too soon.
Shelina — Grade 8

Selections from: Shelley Harwayne, ed., *Messages to Ground Zero: Children Respond to September 11, 2001*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002.

The Educational Value of Writing

Developing fluency in writing has always been a fundamental aim of education, even if the promise has never been fully realized. In today's complex, high-technology world, the importance of writing as a fundamental organizing objective of education is no less valid or practical. Writing, properly understood, is thought on paper. Increasingly, in the information age, it is also thought on screen, a richly elaborated, logically connected amalgam of ideas, words, themes, images, and multimedia designs. Whether on paper or on screen, writing is an overlooked key to transforming learning in the United States.

Michelangelo, a sculptor and artist, understood a writer's challenge clearly. This genius thought of his art as little more than the task of releasing the figure that was already there from the block of marble in which it had always been embedded. Expert writers, like skilled sculptors, cooperate with the material at hand. In a sense they participate with it, so that anything that might get in the way of appreciating what they are trying to get across is carved away to permit the central ideas to emerge. Working with the same material, unskilled writers misread the seams, in the process wrecking the marble and confusing the central point.

Writing extends far beyond mastering grammar and punctuation. The ability to diagram a sentence does not make a good writer. There are many students capable of identifying every part of speech who are barely able to produce a piece of prose.[4] While exercises in descriptive, creative, and narrative writing help develop students' skills, writing is best understood as a complex intellectual activity that requires students to stretch their minds, sharpen their analytical capabilities, and make valid and accurate distinctions.

Above all, as students and young adults begin a lifetime of learning, they will find that writing is liberating, satisfying, even joyful. Writing is not simply a way for students to demonstrate what they know. It is a way to help them understand what they know. At its best, writing is learning. Writing competence builds confidence, which readily turns into creativity and fun, precisely what is most frequently absent from the policy discussions about today's schools. As a nation, we can barely begin

to imagine how powerful K–16 education might be if writing were put in its proper focus. Facility with writing opens students up to the pleasure of exercising their minds in ways that drilling on facts, details, and information never will. More than a way of knowing, writing is an act of discovery.

Commitment to Writing

American education will never realize its potential as an engine of opportunity and economic growth until a writing revolution puts the power of language and communication in their proper place in the classroom. Yet, although many models of effective writing instruction exist (see "First-Grade Cross-Generational Writing," opposite), both the teaching and practice of writing are increasingly shortchanged throughout the school and college years.[5] Disciplines such as mathematics, history, science, and foreign language properly deserve the attention they receive. This Commission holds no brief for the idea that writing can be improved while substance is ignored. Still, writing is how students connect the dots in their knowledge. And writing, always time-consuming for student and teacher, is today hard-pressed in the American classroom.

Despite its importance to learning, formal attention to writing leaves a lot to be desired, in both school and college. At the high school level, for example, although enrollment in challenging high school mathematics and science courses has climbed in the last decade, participation in courses like English composition has dropped.[6]

The commitment to writing on college and university campuses can also be called into question. Recent analyses indicate that more than 50 percent of first-year college students are unable to produce papers relatively free of language errors.[7] Analyzing arguments and synthesizing information are also beyond the scope of most first-year students, according to these accounts. Yet, complaints about the inadequacy of undergraduate writing programs and problems associated with leaving the teaching of writing to inexperienced graduate students have gathered dust on shelves for decades.[8]

FIRST-GRADE CROSS-GENERATIONAL WRITING

The first-grade teaching team at Goodman Elementary School in Chandler, Arizona, desperately wanted to get computers into its classrooms. The school, meanwhile, was looking to improve its relationship with the many retirees who make up our community and who continually oppose school bond issues.

This is where the Cross-Generational Writing Project began. The project envisioned regular e-mail correspondence between Goodman's first-graders and the senior retirees in Sun Lakes. The specific curricular objective was to promote, refine, and improve written language skills by exchanging stories, tales, and life experiences. Those skills extended to mastery of correct letter form, complete sentences, spelling and punctuation, and creative writing. The students would be able to use their senior partners as writing models. Our proposal also encouraged lifelong learning for the senior citizens.

Six seniors agreed to work with us. Most had never used computers, not to speak of going online, getting e-mail, and sending messages in return. Once they began corresponding, they could also call me for telephone support if they got stuck. The Sun Lakes seniors were also intimidated over what they were going to say to little kids—until they went through a first run, when they realized, "This is a piece of cake. These are just 6-year-old children." Questions such as "How are you?" "What color eyes do you have?" and "Do you have a dog?" began to flow.

Meanwhile, the project was building in a level of self-esteem and motivation for students by letting them bond with their senior counterparts via computer education, written language instruction, and a rewarding friendship. The participants, old and young alike, also developed a cross-generational understanding and appreciation of various cultures and heritages. The seniors regularly shared stories about their family members, what they did themselves as youngsters, and letting the present youngsters know "what the world was like back then."

We ended our year with a party in the school library. We invited our e-mail buddies to come and visit us. We presented them with flowers, awards, and lots of first-grade cheer. We also shared the substantial portfolio of student and senior writing examples that had grown over the past months. Creative writing had become a paramount activity to the students instead of drudgery, and they were writing very detailed, complete paragraphs.

The seniors, meanwhile, couldn't wait to meet the kids: they were thrilled, they said, to be involved with children's learning and were impressed with how much these children had learned and grown in their writing. This was a wonderful way to end the year.

We have over 30 Sun Lakes Buddies writing to us now. The retirees are also seeking more activities they could be doing on the Web and are e-mailing us with interesting sites they have found. To accommodate this surge in participation we had to train some parents in e-mailing and let them help us get our 75 first-graders e-mailing at least twice a month.

We have also established ongoing exchanges with retired educators in California and other retirees across the country. And recently when one member of the first-grade teaching team visited Japan, she corresponded via e-mail with her students. So, if you think first-graders and e-mailing won't work, think again! These children are making lifetime friendships with the computer, the e-mailing process, and of course, the writing process.

Source: Rikki L. Hayes, First-grade teacher at the Goodman Elementary School, Chandler, Arizona. Available at the National School Network: http://nsn.bbn.com/community/call_stories/stories_intro.shtml.

What the Assessments Tell Us

Despite the neglect of writing instruction, it would be false to claim that most students cannot write. What most students cannot do is write well. At least, they cannot write well enough to meet the demands they face in higher education and the emerging work environment. Basic writing itself is not the issue; the problem is that most students cannot write with the skill expected of them today.

The latest findings from the National Assessment of Educational Progress ("the nation's report card") support those conclusions.[9] These findings indicate that most students have mastered writing basics, but few are able to create precise, engaging, coherent prose. These 1998 findings (see Figure 1) indicate that about four out of five students in grades 4, 8, and 12 are at or above the "basic" level of writing. However, only about one-quarter at each grade level are at or above the "proficient" level. Even more telling, only one in one hundred is thought to be "advanced."

Figure 1

National Writing Achievement by Grade Level, 1998

GRADE	Below Basic	At or Above Basic	At or Above Proficient	Advanced
Four	16%	84%	23%	1%
Eight	16%	84%	27%	1%
Twelve	22%	78%	22%	1%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The NAEP 1998 Writing Report Card for the Nation and the States.* Available at: nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard.

The NAEP standards establish a very high threshold. Students can "write." They "know" language, in some sense. The difficulty is that they cannot systematically produce writing at the high levels of skill, maturity, and sophistication required in a complex, modern economy. The Commission referred above to the inability of almost all students to create prose that is precise, engaging, and coherent. That is a sort of shorthand for the "proficient" standards set by NAEP at grade 12 (see "High School Student Writing," below). These are standards that encourage first-rate organization, convincing and

elaborated responses to the tasks assigned, and the use of rich, evocative and compelling language. Those standards set a very high bar. Only about one-quarter (22 percent) of all high school seniors are able to meet it.

The NAEP data indicate that when asked to think on paper, most students produce rudimentary and fairly run-of-the-mill prose. Writing at the basic level demonstrates only a limited grasp of the importance of extended or complex thought. The responses are acceptable in the fundamentals of form, content, and language. These students are able to organize their thoughts and provide some supporting details, while their grammar, spelling, and punctuation are not an utter disaster. On the whole, readers are able to understand what these students are trying to say.

However, about three-quarters of students at all grade levels are unable to go very much beyond that. By grade 12, most students are producing relatively immature and unsophisticated writing. Indeed, more than one in five continues to produce prose with a substantial number of errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation.[10] We must do better.

The Need for a Cultural Sea Change

What the Commission proposes in the pages that follow is a revolution of sorts, a cultural sea change that would provide writing with sufficient time and resources in the classroom. If this revolution succeeds, it can produce a society in which:

- All school and college graduates will find themselves equipped to meet the writing demands of the workplace.
- All students will be better equipped to tackle demanding advanced courses requiring fluent command of language — not only those in literature, history, sociology, and political science, but also courses in mathematics, science, and technology.
- All students will be better prepared to take advantage of the many opportunities for postsecondary education in the United States.

- Above all, armed with new strengths in analysis and logic, Americans will be better equipped to observe, think, and make judgments about the many complex and demanding issues that come before the citizenry in a democracy.

All of those desirable goals are within our reach — if this generation can be true to the best American instincts and traditions. Our generation has somehow convinced itself that the wealthiest nation in the history of the world is destitute and unable to finance pressing public needs. Yet, no matter how distressed the economy was in the past, when pressed about critical public needs, Americans always responded. Today's most pressing domestic challenge is that of improving public schools. In dealing with this challenge, one of the greatest potential rewards lies in better writing — and improved thinking.

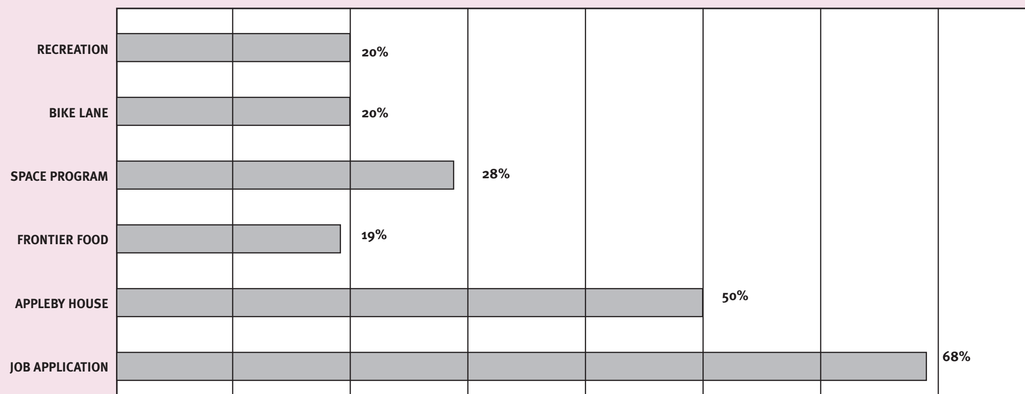
The following NAEP writing samples may be considered typical of current writing by high school students. Students were given six assignments: two pieces of informative writing (1) to justify their qualifications for a summer job and (2) to explain "Appleby," a local haunted house; one piece of analytic writing about frontier diets; and three pieces of persuasive writing taking a position on (1) bike lanes in their neighborhood, (2) the space program, and (3) the need for more recreational facilities.

Below are three representative pieces submitted about the Appleby House. Each is a complete, unedited response to the exercise. The Appleby exercise provided students with basic information about the house and asked them to write an explanatory newspaper article about it.

Rating	Representative Text
Unsatisfactory 48% of respondents	The house with no windows. This is a house with dead-end hallways, 36 rooms and stairs leading to the cieling [sic]. Doorways go nowhere and all this to confuse ghosts.
Adequate 50% of respondents	Man builds strange house to scare ghosts. He says that he did it to confuse the ghosts. But why may we ask would he want to spend 10 years building a house. For instance there are stairs that go nowhere and hallways that go nowhere. This house has 36 rooms. If you ask me I think it is kind of strange.
Elaborated 2% of respondents	Years of rumors and unsubstantiated reports have created, in a quiet urban neighborhood, a house of horrors. The dwelling is one Appleby House, a modest dwelling of 36 rooms built over an 8 year period. On interviewing neighbors, who dubbed the owner "strange," one finds that 10 carpenters have been employed to build such oddities as stairways to ceilings, windows on blank walls, and doorways going nowhere. According to reports, these bizarre customizings are intended to confuse ghosts. Maybe the owner will report one day that he has caught one in a dead end hallway! Until then, however, the mystery of the building of Appleby House remains just that—a mystery.

The figure below displays the proportion of students rated adequate in all six areas.

Proportion of Eleventh-Grade Students Rated "Adequate" or Better by Writing Task



Source: OERI, 1993.

CHAPTER 2

Challenges Ahead

Substantively, four challenges require particular attention: time for writing, assessment or measuring results, integrating technology into the teaching and learning of writing, and support for teaching and other classroom issues.

A Prisoner of Time

In today's schools, writing is a prisoner of time. Learning how to present one's thoughts on paper requires time. The sheer scope of the skills required for effective writing is daunting. The mechanics of grammar and punctuation, usage, developing a "voice" and a feel for the audience, mastering the distinctions between expository, narrative, and persuasive writing (and the types of evidence required to make each convincing)—the list is lengthy. These skills cannot be picked up from a few minutes here, and a few minutes there, all stolen from more "important" subjects.

Yet at the elementary school level, according to data from NAEP, practically all students (97 percent) report spending three hours a week or less on writing assignments, which amounts to about 15 percent of the time they spend watching television. The situation is only marginally better in high school. About half of twelfth-graders (49 percent) report that they are assigned a paper of three or more pages perhaps once or twice a month in English class. Nearly four in 10 (39 percent) reported such assignments "never" or "hardly ever."[11] And the extended research paper, once a rite of passage in the senior year, is rarely required any more because teachers do not have time to deal with it.[12]

Teachers no less than students are trapped in the time dilemma. Elementary school teachers typically face a single class of 25 to 35 students. While the task of teaching writing has to be shoehorned into the time available during the day, the sheer number of students facing the elementary teacher is not an insuperable obstacle to teaching writing. Many upper-level teachers, on the other hand, face between 120 to 200 students, weekly if not daily. Teachers of English (or history or biology) who ask simply for a weekly one-page paper are immediately overwhelmed with the challenge of reading, responding to, and evaluating what their request produces.

More attention must be paid to writing. More time must be found for it. And teachers must be provided with the time and resources required if they are to perform their work professionally.

Measuring Results

Assessment is one of the major pillars of the standards-based reform movement that has swept across American education in the last two decades. Without accurate measurement of what students have learned, neither school nor academic officials— nor parents and students—will know where they stand. But as everyone understands, student performance and growth in writing are difficult to measure, for many reasons. Standards vary from place to place and state to state. Unless they have been carefully trained, individual evaluators may hold different expectations for student performance. Since single assessments are unlikely to be able to show the range of a student's abilities—and cannot conceivably measure growth—a writing assessment, ideally, should rest on several pieces of writing, written for different audiences and on different occasions. Writing assessment is a genuine challenge.

Despite these difficulties, assessment systems have an important role to play in the improvement of the teaching and learning of writing. While individual students need to know their strengths and weaknesses, their teachers also need to understand when students are writing effectively and when they are experiencing difficulty. With new rubrics and other evaluation guides for teachers, considerable progress has been made in recent years toward improving the writing evaluation in the classroom. Outside the classroom, many others concerned with education—including policymakers, parents, researchers, admissions officials, and members of the general public —expect to have some sense of both individual and collective student success in writing.

If assessment systems are to help improve writing, several challenges must be overcome. Three are of particular concern to the writing community. The first is that no single piece of writing, even generated under ideal conditions, can serve as an adequate indicator

of overall proficiency.[13] The second is that students need enough time to plan, produce, revise, and edit a single piece of written work under test conditions. While the amount of time required may vary depending on the assessment itself, without adequate time, students cannot provide an accurate picture of their abilities. The third is a sense of concern about the appropriate uses of different types of assessment. Confusion about policy goals frequently confounds measurement purposes and instruments. It is unlikely that the same assessment instrument can be used for program evaluation, institutional accountability, and enhanced student learning.

In combination, these considerations of purpose, opportunity, and time complicate the measurement agenda and establish a demanding assessment standard.

Technology and the Teaching of Writing

Meanwhile, just as they have transformed schools, offices, and homes, computers have introduced entirely new ways of generating, organizing, and editing text. Computers help shorten the work of composing and revising. The tedious task of retyping entire pages simply to move a sentence is a thing of the past. Technology also opens new opportunities for helping children learn the rudiments of grammar and composition, while encouraging them to share their work with one another. Although the norms and forms of electronic communication are hardly rigorous, it is apparent that many of today's young people, raised at keyboards and eager to exchange messages with their friends, are comfortable with these new technologies and eager to use them.

It is equally clear that schools face challenges when they take advantage of these new possibilities. Teachers have to reconsider their inherent attitudes about the value of writing grounded in new technologies. Far from undermining libraries, the Web puts the world at students' fingertips. Letters and notes are still appropriate in many circumstances, but e-mail, instant messaging, and electronic conferencing provide writers with an immediate and much larger audience. Educators need to tap into students' inherent interest in these methods of creating and sharing writing.

Beyond that, there is no doubt that the resources for technology available to schools and colleges — including hardware, software, and teacher development — are often inadequate and frequently unequal. Although important efforts have been made by state and national leaders, in partnership with the private sector, a lot remains to be done in this area. Policymakers need to make sure that students and faculty members in every school and college have access both to current technologies and the training needed to take advantage of them.

The Teaching Dilemma

The teaching of writing presents its own challenges of policy and pedagogy. It will not be reasonable to ask more from classroom instructors unless they are also provided with more assistance. Yet teachers typically receive little instruction in how to teach writing. Only a handful of states require courses in writing for certification, even for elementary school teachers. And very few high school instructors in disciplines such as history, science, or mathematics are exposed to courses in how to teach writing. No matter how hard they work, these instructors, lacking any real understanding of what good writing is or looks like, are often ill equipped to teach it.

Part of the difficulty is that pre- and in-service teacher professional development rarely offers teachers an opportunity to see themselves as writers — to experience the power and satisfaction of writing as a means of learning and self-expression. Most teachers also do not enjoy access to the latest, high-quality training opportunities (see "Redesigning Professional Development," below). Writing is a prisoner of time in the preparation and continuing professional development of teachers, as well.

Second-language learners: All of these classroom issues resonate with a special force when English-language learners and immigrant children enter the classroom. Teachers confront growing linguistic diversity; English-language learners are one of the fastest growing student populations in the United States. Too frequently, teachers are forced to confront these new challenges without the support and training required to respond to the

special needs of these students.[14] Outside the regular classroom, poorly designed English as a Second Language programs can oversimplify communication in English and provide little interaction between English-language learners and other students.

Immigrant Americans have always articulated the problems and promise of the United States powerfully. No matter their native language, they have often expressed the experience and condition of people in this country most deeply. The role of our nation, and its schools, should continue to be what it has been at its best: helping nonnative speakers give eloquent voice to their experiences and aspirations. These students should be considered not a burden to be borne and "fixed," but a resource to be developed and valued.

A Field of Vision

Those four issues — time, measurement, technology, and teaching — frame the field of vision the Commission brings to the challenge of improving writing. That vision involves a national writing agenda and a national writing challenge.

REDESIGNING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Old workshop delivery models for teachers are giving way to vibrant ongoing professional learning communities where teachers generate, as well as gain, knowledge. The National Writing Project, arguably the most successful teacher network in the United States, offers a model of how to foster learning communities of teachers. Begun in 1974, the project has spawned 165 regional learning communities — school–university partnerships that help teachers improve how they teach writing and foster student learning.

Based on a two-year study of two sites, we conclude the project's successful approach lies in a distinctive set of social practices that motivate teachers, make learning accessible, and build an ongoing professional community. The social practices include:

Treat every colleague as a potentially valuable contributor. The project builds its agenda around the contributions of every participant. What each teacher thinks, wonders, reads, learns, and questions becomes the content for professional development.

Teach other teachers. The project encourages a dual commitment from teachers: to share what they know and to learn from what colleagues know.

Share, discuss, and critique in public forums. Key to breaking through teacher isolation and silence are the public forums that the project creates for teachers to share their work and then critique and discuss it.

Turn ownership of learning over to the learners. The project insists on professional development built around the problems and concerns that teachers raise. Such a practice turns the current notion of teacher accountability on its head because teachers become responsible for assessing classroom practices.

Situate learning in practice and relationships. This kind of learning requires a community that encourages and supports those who take risks, that tolerates mistakes and learns from them, and that values constructive critique.

Provide multiple entry points into learning communities. Inexperienced teachers want to learn basic strategies; those with some experience may be in search of new strategies; veteran teachers find that they learn a great deal by sharing what they have honed from years of practice.

Reflect on teaching by reflecting on learning. Teachers who reflect on their own learning can apply these insights to their teaching.

Share leadership. From the beginning, teachers lead discussions, give teaching demonstrations, and prepare for taking their best work public.

Adopt a stance of inquiry. Inquiry and research are fundamental to good teaching. Together, teachers can find better ways to answer the learning needs of students.

Rethink professional identity and link it to the professional community. Quality teaching is not just an individual but a group responsibility.

Adapted from: Ann Lieberman and Diane R. Wood, "Redesigning Professional Development," *Educational Leadership*, March 2002.
Complete text available at: http://www.ascd.org/author/el/2002/03march/lieberman.html.

CHAPTER 3

Recommendations

To help schools create skillful, self-confident writers, the Commission advances five major recommendations. They involve (1) a national writing agenda; (2) time; (3) the measurement of results; (4) technology; and (5) professional development.

I. A Writing Agenda for the Nation

WE RECOMMEND *that the nation's leaders place writing squarely in the center of the school agenda and that policymakers at the state and local levels provide the resources required to improve writing.*

Reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic have always been the keystones of educational policy. Yet writing is truly the neglected "R" in the school reform movement.

- **Comprehensive Writing Policy:** Governors, legislators, local school boards, and parent groups should underscore the importance of writing by developing clear, unambiguous, and comprehensive policies that aim to double the amount of time students spend writing; ensure that every school district has a writing plan; insist that writing be taught at all grade levels and in all subjects; and provide for teacher professional development.
- **Federal Leadership:** We ask legislators and policymakers to work together to establish a National Conference on Writing (involving federal, state, and local leaders, educators, parents, and writing experts) to speak with a clear voice on the importance of writing in American schools. Nothing can alert the general public to the significance of this issue more quickly and powerfully than what President Theodore Roosevelt once called the "bully pulpit."
- **State and Local Leadership:** We ask governors, state legislators, mayors, county executives, state and local boards of education, college and university presidents and faculty members, and school superintendents, principals, and teachers to make the case that effective writing is essential, not merely to the nation's economic well-being but to its future as a vibrant, informed, and humane democratic society.

Part of that leadership responsibility lies in persuading the general public that schools cannot be improved without resources and that writing, in particular, requires substantially more support if student achievement is to improve.

- **State Standards:** Forty-nine states now have some statement about uniform standards and expectations for student performance by level of schooling. The writing policy contemplated by the Commission should explicitly incorporate writing into these standards and the assessment systems aligned with them.
- **Teacher Education:** Statewide policy and standards should require that teacher preparation programs provide all prospective teachers with exposure to writing theory and practice. State and local educational leaders should also provide support for multiple workshops and other opportunities that encourage teachers already in the classroom to upgrade their writing skills and competence as writing teachers.
- **Higher Education's Role:** Colleges and universities have an obligation to improve teacher preparation (discussed under Recommendation 5) and make writing more central to their own programs of study. The teaching of writing at the college level should be infused across the curriculum. Formal courses in the teaching of writing (including English Composition) should be the responsibility of well-trained, qualified professional staff.
- **Resources:** Writing is essential. Society cannot continue to impose unfunded mandates on schools and colleges in the form of new demands without also providing additional resources to help educators respond. "Excellence costs," as the National Commission on Excellence in Education reported 20 years ago, "but in the long run, mediocrity costs far more."

2. Time

WE RECOMMEND *that state and local education agencies work with writing specialists to develop strategies for increasing the amount of time students spend writing.*

Because writing requires time, the Commission is troubled by findings that most students spend little time writing. It is small wonder that students do not write well. Most do not have sufficient time to practice the art.

- **Time:** The Commission believes that the amount of time most students spend writing should be at least doubled. This time can be found through assignments at home and by encouraging more writing during the school day in curriculum areas not traditionally associated with it. This change alone will do more to improve student performance than anything else states or local school leaders can do.
- **Writing Across the Curriculum:** We strongly endorse writing across the curriculum. The concept of doubling writing time is feasible because of the near-total neglect of writing outside English departments. In history, foreign languages, mathematics, home economics, science, physical education, art, and social science, all students can be encouraged to write more — and to write more effectively.
- **Assignments:** We suggest more use of out-of-school time for writing. From elementary school on, students should be expected to produce written work as part of their normal homework assignments. Just 15 minutes of writing four nights a week would add 33 percent to the amount of time the average elementary student spends writing. Parents should be writing partners with their children, sharing their own writing with them and reviewing written work as their children complete it. Research is crystal clear: Schools that do well insist that their students write every day and that teachers provide regular and timely feedback with the support of parents.

Time is writing's great ally. Policymakers must help schools find the time students (and teachers) require if writing is to be effectively taught and developed.

3. Measuring Results

WE RECOMMEND *that governors, legislators, local school boards, and companies specializing in testing ensure that the assessment of writing is fair and authentic.*

Because machine-readable, multiple-choice tests produce quantifiable results and are relatively easy to administer and score, there is a great temptation to treat these results as unusually accurate. The tyranny of the written word is a small burden compared to the despotism of tables offering the comfort of precision. This is true no matter how frequently testing companies caution the unsophisticated about the interpretation of results.

Writing is one area where using multiple-choice questions as the sole assessment technique compromises the very talent the assessment sets out to gauge.

Machine-scorable questions in writing are appropriate in certain situations — to see, for example, if a student can identify parts of speech, correct grammatical errors, or sort out meaning. But an authentic assessment of writing depends on requiring students to create prose that carefully trained people read and evaluate in a fair and consistent fashion.

- **Alignment:** Policymakers must ensure that assessments across the board are aligned with the standards and curriculum. This is particularly critical in writing, which is likely to be more difficult to assess accurately than many other areas of the curriculum. Although virtually every state commits itself to alignment between standards and assessments, recent rigorous reviews of state standards and assessment efforts indicate that only 9 or 10 states have well-aligned systems, while many of the remainder have quite a bit of work to do.[15] To maintain faith with the public that has committed itself to high expectations, standards and assessments must be aligned, in writing and elsewhere, in reality as well as in rhetoric.

- **Nature of Assessment:** As noted above, students should be required to produce a piece of writing as part of the assessment process. Multiple-choice, machine-scorable questions and answers will not be sufficient here. The Commission believes that assessment programs must provide adequate time for students to plan, write, and edit a piece of prose. In this regard, the Writing Challenge described below should devote considerable attention to what an effective national assessment of writing competence should look like.
- **Best Practice in Assessment:** Effective writing assessments do exist and associations of state and local education leaders should encourage their widespread replication. In assessing writing, there should be no need to reinvent the wheel.

Substantial progress has been made in training readers to evaluate student writing samples consistently and fairly. It is, therefore, possible to assess writing, but nobody should underestimate the difficulty.

4. Technology

WE RECOMMEND *that the private sector work with curriculum specialists, assessment experts, and state and local educational agencies to apply emerging technologies to the teaching, development, grading, and assessment of writing.*

As noted earlier, modern telecommunications and technologies have transformed the American home and workplace. These emerging technologies can be applied in the classroom with similar powerful effects.

- **Technology and Writing Policy:** Recent federal telecommunications policy has recognized that the national technological infrastructure for education is as critical to the United States in the twenty-first century as highways were in the twentieth. This recognition should be extended to financing the hardware and software required in schools and colleges (and training for faculty and teachers). A National Educational Technology Trust should be explored,

perhaps financed through federal–state–private partnerships, to pay for up to 90 percent of the costs associated with providing hardware, software, and training for every student and teacher in the nation.

- **Teaching and Learning:** We believe new technologies can advance both the teaching and learning of writing. Fairly simple programs already exist to improve language and writing basics. These programs can assist both teachers and students. Although no one should expect software to develop advanced writing skills, the Commission believes that programs can be developed to help all students develop at least modest competence as writers. The development and classroom application of these programs should be encouraged.
- **Time:** The Commission believes that technology holds out great promise as a means of expanding time for writing, for both students and teachers. For students, it is clear that computers, search engines, workstations, and printers open up new timesaving possibilities as they research and write their papers. Developing software programs also make it possible for technologically based corrections and commentary on students' papers, providing teachers the opportunity to assign writing that they cannot now find the time to correct.
- **Research on Technology:** Our society must invest in research on how new and emerging technologies can help improve writing. Areas of exploration should include:
    - the use of software to identify mistakes in grammar and spelling;
    - the value of programs that permit students to share and edit their work with each other;
    - the use of emerging programs to enhance the ability of students and teachers to assess writing samples; and
    - the development of software to measure student writing competence in formal, standardized assessments.

As in other areas of our national life, technology and software cannot be expected to substitute for human judgment, but they can undoubtedly become invaluable allies in the quest to improve writing instruction, learning, and assessment.

5. Teachers and Professional Development

WE RECOMMEND *that state and local educational agencies provide comprehensive professional development for all teachers to help improve classroom practice.*

Teachers deserve support as they develop students' writing. Nowhere is this more important than in isolated rural communities and the nation's major cities. School graduates from these areas commonly report they were poorly prepared for the expectation of "academic literacy" on campus and on the job — a set of skills grounded in the ability to read, write, speak, and think critically.

- **Writing Is Every Teacher's Responsibility:** Developing writers is everybody's business. It is not a simple and easy task, or something that will be finished and out of the way by the end of next week, or even the end of next year. Developing critical thinkers and writers should be understood as one of the central works of education. State and local curriculum guidelines should require writing in every curriculum area and at all grade levels (see "High School Biology and Writing," opposite). Writing should be considered every teacher's responsibility.
- **Teacher Education:** Expectations for good writing should be universal among all teachers. Universities can help advance common expectations by requiring courses in teaching writing for all prospective teachers. States can reinforce this requirement by insisting on successful completion of a course in writing theory and practice as a condition of teacher licensing. Universities should also offer teachers opportunities to learn writing theory and develop their own writing skills. They should provide pre-and in-service opportunities so that teachers themselves can write and enjoy the opportunity to respond to examples of student and peer writing. These efforts can help teachers experience writing both as a way of demonstrating knowledge and as a complex form of learning and discovery.

HIGH SCHOOL BIOLOGY AND WRITING

Robert Tierney, a biology teacher at Irvington High School in Fremont, California, believed that writing could be a powerful learning tool for his students. But for many of his colleagues, time spent writing was time lost for learning science.

But Tierney believed there was also a place for what he terms "expressive writing": "Few biology teachers are themselves writers. Yet modern biology instructions require a hands-on, inquiry, think-through-the-problem approach. Expressive writing is a means of thinking through a problem," he said.

With a colleague, Tierney divided the 136 sophomore, junior, and senior biology students at Irvington into an experimental group and a comparison group. Both would cover the same topics at the same time, do the labs, and have homework assignments corrected with a stress upon usage and spelling. The experimental group was asked to keep reading logs and "neuron notes" or learning logs. It was also asked to complete practice essays, develop writing directed at specific audiences other than the teacher, make end-of-class summaries, participate in group writing, and take essay tests. The comparison group kept no reading logs or neuron notes. It was not asked to provide a practice essay, write to any audience other than the teacher, or provide end-of-class summaries. The comparison group provided some limited group writing, but in place of essay tests, it completed multiple-choice tests.

Two tests, one on genetics after the first semester, and the second on seed plants following the second semester, were used to assess the results. For each, a pretest and a posttest were developed, using the same multiple-choice questions. In addition, a longer-term "recall" test was administered to test students' recall of genetics (after 16 weeks) and seed plants (after three weeks).

The results speak for themselves. Both the experimental and comparison group performed at about the same level on the multiple-choice tests. But, after 16 weeks, the experimental group scored 11 percent higher than the comparison group on genetics recall. After three weeks, the experimental group outperformed the comparison group by 5 percent on seed-comparison recall.

Tierney and his colleague, Harry Stookey, concluded that students with the opportunity to write had retained more of what they had learned. Further, they concluded that writing had helped these students "learn the subject matter more thoroughly, and their papers, reflecting what the student actually understands, are interesting to read."

Source: The National Writing Project, and Carl Nagin, *Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.

- **Professional Development:** Common expectations about good writing must be developed across the disciplines. Teachers and school administrators can build common performance expectations by convening regular workshops on what constitutes good writing, particularly at the middle and high school levels where each student has several teachers. These workshops and professional development opportunities should be provided to every instructor. Teachers should be reminded that good writing extends beyond language formalities and grammar to incorporate content, substance, and meaning. Finally, these workshops should introduce teachers to the use of technology in improving writing, while asking teachers to consider how writing changes as it moves online.
- **Classroom Practice:** We ask that writing be considered a priority at all levels of schooling. As school leaders develop these new policies, they should incorporate writing opportunities for every student from the earliest years of school through secondary school. The barriers between the categories below are elastic and porous, but classroom practice and curricula should be developmental so that they move from:
    - children's literacy development in the early years involving drawing, talking, word play, spelling, pictures, and writing stories, through
    - middle school programs that encourage observational, descriptive, and analytical writing, to
    - high school programs involving complex summaries, lab reports, book reviews, and reflective and persuasive essays of different lengths and levels of difficulty. This work should demand analysis, synthesis, and research from every student, in a variety of literary and nonliterary genres.
- **English-Language Learners:** We point to the special needs of English-language learners. The Commission believes there is an urgent need for school–university partnerships to serve these students and build on their strengths. Multiple-language learning is a remarkably sophisticated activity, a multiplicative process that, at its best, encourages dual languages to interact with each other in powerful ways. When that dynamic develops, in both language and writing, the learning that takes place is much more than the sum of the languages' parts. This is an area that promises rich dividends from greater experimentation, and from more

fieldwork and model programs developed and analyzed in partnerships between school officials and academic researchers.

Professional development demands the best efforts of the entire education community. Neither universities nor schools can ignore their obligations to improve the teaching of writing. It should also be understood that writing will not be improved on the cheap or by hectoring teachers. At all levels, writers face problems, and teachers are needed to support their growth. Policymakers and opinion shapers need to consider these challenges sympathetically, not dismiss or deride them.

An Action Agenda

This report cannot implement itself. Sustained follow-through is needed, or else these recommendations, like so many others, will gather dust on library shelves. The Commission proposes the creation of a new group charged with implementing a Writing Challenge to the Nation, an action agenda for making sure the recommendations in this document are put in place.

In our view, the Challenge should be an in-depth, five-year, blue-ribbon effort to guide policymakers and practitioners in the difficult work ahead, issue progress reports, and provide assistance to state and local educators. At the policy level, the Challenge should provide detailed guidance on the best ways to develop writing, employ technologies, expand writing time, and advance measurement. For state and local educators, the challenge should provide guidance on best practice in assessment and the measurement of results.

Above all, the Challenge should keep its eye relentlessly on implementation. It can help governors and legislators make writing a priority. It can insist that resources should be adequate to support the effort. It can campaign so that colleges and universities require courses in the teaching of writing of all prospective teachers. It can encourage the private sector to work with curriculum experts to improve the application of technology to the teaching of writing. And, it can serve as the bridge between writing theory and writing practice.

The Commission asks foundations to join with nonprofit groups to finance the Challenge.

A Working Program for Creating a Nation of Writers

What the Commission has outlined above amounts to a working program to encourage a cultural change around writing in the United States, in both schools and colleges and in the larger society. It calls for leadership, resources, and a new emphasis on a comprehensive writing policy. It asks for the time writing deserves in the curriculum. It devotes a lot of attention to the heart of the matter — teaching and classroom needs. It explores how technology can be used to advance writing and examines the dimensions of a responsible and effective assessment system. Finally, it lays out an action agenda, a Writing Challenge to the Nation, to address the many details that remain to be ironed out.

Our final comment is more in the nature of a plea to the writing community than a recommendation. We invite teachers of writing, and those on college campuses who develop teachers of writing, to unite around a principled agenda for advancing writing. Pedagogical disputes within the reading and mathematics communities frequently have paralyzed progress in these areas. Nothing will faster derail the writing revolution this Commission seeks than the kind of arcane polemics that accompanied the nation's "Reading Wars" of the 1990s. A similar situation in writing must be avoided.

If the writing community can unite behind a broad and commonly understood writing agenda, all Americans can rally to that standard. When they do, American citizens will fully appreciate the tribute to the power of the written word once delivered by one of the nation's great writers. This is what Abraham Lincoln had to say:

> Writing — the art of communicating thoughts to the mind — is the great invention of the world....Great, very great, in enabling us to converse with the dead, the absent, and the unborn, at all distances of time and space, and great not only in its direct benefits, but its great help to all other inventions.

Great also, in Lincoln's words, in its "help to all other inventions." Of those, the most profound was the invented concept of "America." The United States is a nation, but "America" is an idea, a state of mind. The idea has always revolved around opportunity, possibility, overcoming obstacles, and living one's dreams. A writing revolution can help students seize opportunities, imagine endless possibilities, surmount life's difficulties, and, in living their own dreams, live those of the United States and the world as well.

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5. It is clear, for example, that the research paper, once a rite of passage for high school seniors, is rapidly being abandoned, a victim of time constraints, new state mandates, and a burgeoning emphasis on accountability and assessment. See Center for Survey Research & Analysis, *History Research Paper Study*. November 2002.

6. The College Board, “Ten-Year Trend in SAT Scores Indicates Increased Emphasis on Math Is Yielding Results; Reading and Writing Are Causes for Concern.” (Table 1, p. 6.) Princeton, NJ: College Entrance Examination Board, 2002.

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8. For a useful overview of recent developments in college writing, see “Why Johnny Can’t Write, Even Though He Went to Princeton,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 3, 2003.

9. NAEP, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, periodically assesses nationally representative samples of students in grades 4, 8, and 12. In 1998, it released a comprehensive assessment of students’ writing proficiency. Students were asked to produce written samples, appropriate to their grade level, of three different kinds: narrative, informative, and persuasive. A fourth-grader might be asked to write a narrative about a castle; an eighth-grader an informative essay about designing an educational program; and a twelfth-grader a persuasive argument about the importance of voting.

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