

**THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT'S
NEW TEACHER INITIATIVE:
A STUDY OF OUTCOMES, DESIGN AND
CORE VALUES**

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

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THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT'S NEW TEACHER INITIATIVE:

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Introduction and Overview

The NWP's New Teacher Initiative

The New Teacher Initiative (NTI) is a special effort of the National Writing Project aimed at learning how Writing Project sites can best support the large numbers of new teachers now populating U.S. schools. The specific purpose of the initiative is to help the National Writing Project (NWP) learn how to design and carry out programs that support, with content-specific professional development, novice teachers in urban, high-need schools. Toward this end the NTI funded and supported 18 new teacher support projects at existing NWP sites in a multi-year effort.¹

The most immediate aim of the NTI is to explore multiple professional development approaches and strategies for supporting new teachers. An even broader goal is to capture the lessons learned from the 18 New Teacher Initiative sites and to disseminate information both internally to the NWP network as well as to other external audiences. The work of the NTI holds the potential for 1) a better understanding of the circumstances in which new teachers begin their careers, 2) the design of responsive new teacher support practices, 3) the building of expertise for supporting new teachers across the sites, and 4) the opportunity to examine a host of unexpected, interesting issues and questions concerning new teachers that arise from the effort as it unfolds. The New Teacher Initiative is thus designed as a kind of large-scale "action research" project, intended both to serve new teachers at the designated sites, and to generate knowledge for the National Writing Project and the field at large.

The National Writing Project and New Teachers

Since its beginnings over 30 years ago, the National Writing Project has grown into a national network of 189 local writing project sites located in universities and colleges in 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. With the goal of improving the quality of the teaching force, local writing project sites conduct a broad array of professional development activities in the teaching of writing in schools and districts across the country.

To help teachers teach writing more effectively, the NWP provides a model for sharing and examining best practices, for developing strategies to meet the literacy needs of individual students, and for learning from research in the field. By preparing expert teachers, K-16, to

¹ Nine Cohort One sites were funded in the fall of 2002 and completed their NTI participation in August, 2005. They are: Boston Writing Project (WP), Chicago Area WP, Coastal Georgia WP, District of Columbia Area WP, Maryland WP, New York City WP, Philadelphia WP, Oklahoma State University WP, and Third Coast WP. Nine additional Cohort Two sites began participation in January, 2004 and will continue their work through August, 2006. They are: Delaware WP, Central Texas WP, Houston WP, Marshall WP, Meadowbrook WP, Sabal Palms WP, Southern Nevada WP, Western New York WP, and Winthrop WP.

teach other teachers in their own regions, the project currently serves nearly 100,000 teachers annually.

In the fall of 2002 the National Writing Project, with the support of the W. Clement and Jessie V. Stone Foundation, established the New Teacher Initiative. This initiative, exploratory in nature, is one of several that the NWP currently sponsors “to support sites and teachers in studying and improving their work.”

While historically the NWP does not focus its work on novices, the consensus arising among many of its urban sites is that the support of new teachers is a critically important issue. Site leaders note increasing numbers of new teachers entering urban classrooms under-prepared in the teaching of writing, and under-supported more broadly by either their schools or districts. Because one of the foundational beliefs of the National Writing Project is that access to high-quality educational experiences is a basic right of all learners, including both veteran and beginning teachers as well as their students, the lack of support for novices is seen as an equity issue. Reinforcing the experience of the urban sites is what dramatic statistics currently show about the changes in overall teacher demographics, new teacher attrition and retention rates, and worsening working conditions in schools over the past decade.

The Current Need

According to a recent report, “Tapping the Potential: Retaining and Developing High-Quality New Teachers,”² research continues to add to the growing agreement “that the single most important factor in determining student performance is the quality of the teacher.”³ And yet, current research also shows that “annually approximately six percent of the teaching workforce does not return to teaching. Teachers in all schools are moving out of the profession, but the rate of attrition is roughly 50 percent higher in poor schools than in wealthier ones. And teachers new to the profession are far more likely to leave than are their more seasoned counterparts.”

The “Tapping the Potential: Retaining and Developing High-Quality New Teachers,” report continues:

Why are so many teachers, most of whom chose to enter the profession because of a real desire to make a positive difference in the lives of children, leaving their jobs? A lack of support and poor working conditions are cited by teachers as among the primary factors.

Beginning teachers are particularly vulnerable, because they are more likely to be assigned low-performing students than are their more experienced colleagues. Despite the added challenges that come with teaching children and adolescents with higher needs, most beginners are given no professional support, feedback or demonstration of what it takes to help their students succeed. The result is that new teachers are most at risk of leaving the teaching profession. In fact,

- 14 percent of new teachers leave by the end of their first year
- 33 percent leave within three years
- almost 50 percent leave in five years

*The net result is that one out of every two new teachers hired will quit in five years.*⁴

² Alliance for Excellent Education (2004) *Tapping the potential: Retaining and developing high-quality new teachers*. Washington, DC. Retrieved on August 29, 2005 from <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/TappingThePotential/TappingThePotential.pdf>

³ Ibid., p. 1

⁴ Ibid., pp. 1-2

Inverness Research Associates: Our Role and Our Approach

At the inception of the NTI, we at Inverness Research were asked by the National Writing Project to document and portray the work of the initiative. Our role was to serve as independent observers and as one of several key communication links within the NTI community. The goals of our annual reporting were: to keep the NWP community informed about the progress of new teacher work at each of the sites, to disseminate findings about “best practices” for new teacher support as they developed, and to help build an overall richer knowledge base both within and ultimately beyond the NWP about the content-focused new teacher support the NTI programs provided.⁵

Throughout our three-year study of the NTI our approach has deliberately aimed to reflect the “theory of action” that underlies the design of the initiative itself. Therefore we have examined the key components, assumptions and intended benefits of the initiative, while simultaneously mirroring back to the NTI community our findings as well as our interpretations of their work and its implications.

We have relied heavily on the perspectives and the perceptions of the NTI participants themselves, and have drawn extensively on their own words to illustrate and augment what we ourselves have to say. Over the course of our study we spoke often with a range of people, all of whom served as our teachers: the novices who attended the various NTI programs; the Writing Project Teacher Consultants who planned and delivered those programs; NTI coordinators from each of the 18 programs; site directors from each of the NWP sites; and members of the NTI leadership team. The quotes we select most often reflect the majority voice, or in some instances the “best case” or “leading edge” voice.

Finally, we have paid special attention to learning about the contexts within which the local NTI sites are working. There is an ever-changing political, social and cultural landscape that is unique to the urban schools and districts. The contextual features of this landscape are critical to understanding the issues that have so strongly shaped the new teacher support efforts at each of the NTI sites. Contextual “windfalls” as well as contextual “disasters” have helped forge the emerging NTI models, practices and principles every bit as much as the creativity and hard work of the NTI members themselves.

The reader should consider the products of our study as primarily educative, rather than summative. Our aim is to document and describe the NTI, to suggest the lessons learned, and to stimulate thinking about the initiative and issues of new teacher support.

⁵ See Appendix I for a complete list of the research and evaluation activities we conducted from April, 2002 to December, 2005.

A Series of Linked Reports

As a culmination of three years of studying the NTI, we at Inverness Research Associates have developed a series of four topic-focused module reports.⁶ Although these focal topics have been addressed to a lesser degree in our previous evaluations,⁷ this final collection of reports offers us the opportunity to discuss aspects of the New Teacher Initiative work in greater depth, and most importantly, from a wider perspective, tying them together in a conceptually cohesive fashion.

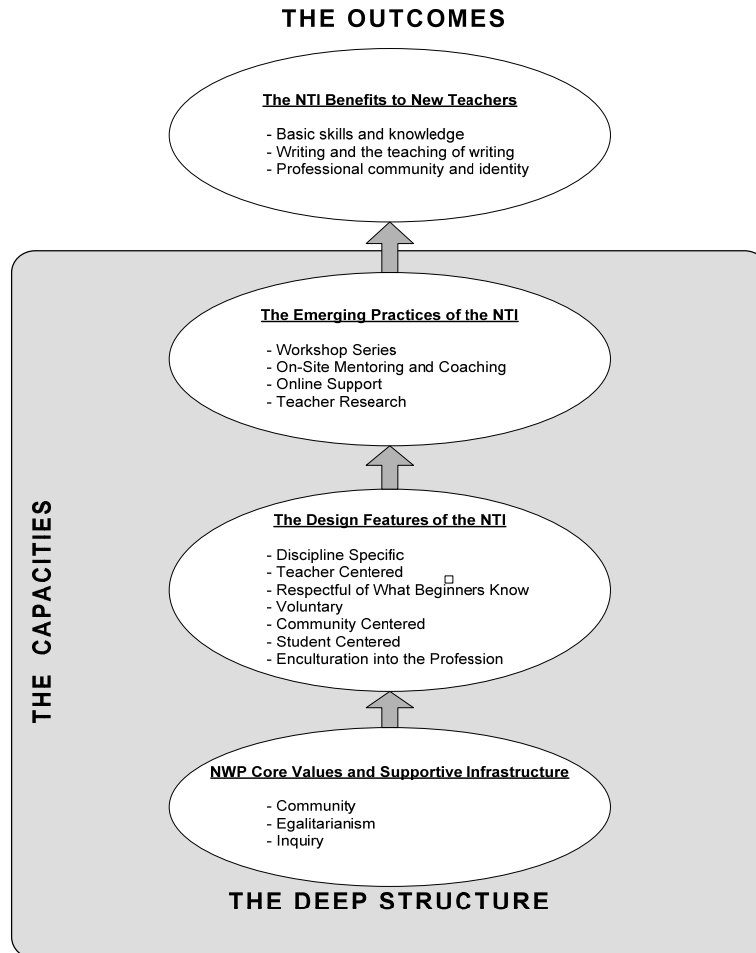
Over the three-year duration of the initiative we had time to think about ideas as they emerged and evolved, building our understanding along the way. We were able to test and stretch ideas through successive interviews with NTI participants, to have those ideas used as thinking tools by the NTI learning community, and, finally, on several occasions, to offer them directly to key NTI leaders for response and critique. In this way each report offers an examination of some set of closely observed and interrogated phenomena arising from the work of the NTI.

The module reports are distinct but highly linked. Each report or paper can be read in isolation to learn more about a specific dimension of the NTI, but ideally, they should be viewed together and in order, beginning with the focus on the initiative outcomes. This strategy will allow the reader to gain the broadest, most coherent understanding of the New Teacher Initiative, and to understand how the linkages between the ideas the papers describe are causal in nature.

Together our four module reports provide a view of the NWP's New Teacher Initiative that traces a series of causal phenomena that is represented in the graphic below:

⁶ Also included in our final reporting are two supporting documents. They are: "Appendix I: List of Research and Evaluation Activities;" and "Appendix II: Bibliography of Resources Consulted."

⁷ See Annual Reports: "The National Writing Project's New Teacher Initiative Annual Report" (December, 2003), and "The National Writing Project's New Teacher Initiative Annual Report" (December, 2004)



In our view the major outcomes of the New Teacher Initiative are the range of benefits accrued by new teachers as the result of their participation in NTI programs. The outcomes or benefits are, in turn, the product of a set of three cascading dimensions of capacity that both pre-existed and shaped the NTI, but also expanded and evolved as a result of the NTI efforts. In other words, these capacities serve as the foundation that underlies the work that produces the outcomes.

- First, we see that the benefits to new teachers are the direct results of common activities, strategies and practices that emerged at the NTI sites as the initiative progressed. This first layer of foundational capacity is that of **effective practices** used in appropriate ways at appropriate times.
- In turn, those practices are derived from and represent **key designs and design principles** we found appearing throughout the professional offerings “invented” by the NTIs. Thus the second layer in the foundation is the defining presence of design principles that help shape the ways in which actual practices are created and implemented.
- Finally, continuing on down the causal chain, the NTI designs and their key features derive from a bed rock of shared values and beliefs that are indigenous to the National Writing

Project. At the same time the NWP has honed over many years a well-developed infrastructure to support sites and individuals in the realization of those values. The third layer in the foundation then is a kind of cultural capacity – the underlying culture, consisting of **core values and supporting infrastructure** for enacting the NWP values.

The four module reports are:

- **The Benefits to New Teachers of the National Writing Project’s New Teacher Initiative**

This module reports our findings regarding the extent to which and the ways in which new teachers benefited from their participation in the NTI programs. We begin with this paper because we believe it is important to document the nature of program outcomes. The NTI ultimately only has value to the extent it is able to serve new teachers in ways that enable them to be better teachers and better teachers of writing. Thus, we provide an array of evidence that helps illuminate the diverse range of benefits that accrued to the NTI new teachers.

We have organized our discussion of the benefits in a hierarchy that is roughly Maslovian in character. We begin with a description of benefits or outcomes that address new teachers’ basic needs. We then discuss the benefits that pertain to the teaching of writing, and end with those benefits that pertain to the overall professionalization of the beginning teachers. In this paper we also begin to explore the idea that the accrued benefits suggest that there are particular practices, design principles, and ultimately core cultural values that produce these particularly rich outcomes and that under-gird the work of the NTI.

- **The Emerging Practices of the National Writing Project’s New Teacher Initiative**

An accomplished teacher develops a proven and diverse repertoire of classroom practices over time. In the same way, a professional development project develops a repertoire of activities, strategies, and ultimately practices and models for educating and supporting teachers. The 18 participating NTI sites developed, tested and refined various activities and strategies as they worked to find ways to serve new teachers.

Just as the NWP supports veteran teachers in sharing their teaching with each other, who thereby refine and improve their classroom instruction, so too has the New Teacher Initiative helped the NTI sites to observe, reflect, and share their new teacher support activities with one another. We see that the NTI practices, similar to classroom teachers’ practices, serve as the currency of exchange within the NTI community as the sites work both individually and in concert to continually refine and improve their program designs.

This report provides a description of four of the most common strategies or practices that have emerged from the NTI work to date. They are: Workshop Series; On-site Mentoring and Coaching; On-line Support; and Teacher Research. For each emergent strategy or practice we include a summary description, specific site-level examples, and an analysis of the benefits and challenges of the practice. We also discuss lessons learned that cut across sites and particular strategies. We conclude with some of our own summary thoughts about the lessons learned from observing new teacher support practices grow and evolve through the course of the initiative.

This module report, although of interest to external audiences, is intended primarily to inform the internal Writing Project audience. It can be thought of as a teaching tool to assist NWP sites in designing programs for new teachers.

- **The Design Features of the National Writing Project's New Teacher Initiative**

Any skilled practice, no matter whether it refers to a classroom or to a NTI program, reflects a set of design features that help define the distinctiveness of the practice and give it coherence. These design features, in turn, both depend on and manifest underlying design principles, which in the NTI we found to be derivatives of underlying foundational NWP beliefs and values. As we observed the New Teacher Initiative unfold we saw a handful of unique design features appear frequently and consistently across the sites.

This module describes those key design features that came to characterize the 18 NTI programs. We identified them as the NTI is: discipline-specific and discipline-centered; new teacher centered; respectful of what new teachers know; voluntary; community-centered; student-centered; and focused on enculturation into the profession. Taken together these design features helped to define the unique profile of the overall initiative, shaped the collection of practices that emerged from the NTI efforts, and made the practices at the individual sites effective.

Throughout this report we refer to current research literature, highlighting how the key features of the NTI are congruent with the design criteria recommended by the most recent research and advocacy reports for high-quality new teacher support programs. We also continue to explore how the most salient design features are closely linked to the larger National Writing Project culture in which the initiative resides.

- **New Teacher Initiative Designs: A Function of National Writing Project Core Values and Supportive Infrastructure**

This final module examines the third, underlying dimension of foundational capacities that produce the outcomes we described in our first report – the benefits to new teachers participating in the NTI. The work of the NTI is embedded in and draws heavily upon the rich cultural capacity of its parent, the National Writing Project. This cultural capacity consists of an ethos, an oral and written history, and a large bank of knowledge developed over the past 30 years of NWP work with teachers of writing.

In our study of the NTI two key aspects of the NWP cultural capacity emerged as critical elements in the efficacy of the initiative. First, we observed a set of NWP core values appear throughout the NTI efforts, serving both as design principles and as ethical standards to the NTI leaders. NTI leaders sought to achieve congruence between their programs and core values. Second, we observed a well-honed NWP infrastructure or modes of accomplishing work, aimed specifically at supporting sites in the realization of those core NWP values.

As the NTI sites faced the common challenge of how best to support new teachers in their local contexts, they drew on and used both NWP core values and NWP infrastructure to drive the process of designing, testing and refining their ideas. In this sense the NTI programs that ultimately took shape were a function of the interaction among three key elements: 1) core NWP values and principles, 2) supportive infrastructure, and 3) various emergent NTI strategies and models for supporting new teachers. The recursive and

iterative interaction among these three elements created a dynamic we found occurring at all 18 NTI sites.

In this report we identify, describe and discuss the two key features of the NWP's cultural capacity that defined the NTI work, namely the core values and the infrastructure designed to enable sites to enact those values. We also discuss the dynamic between these features and the evolving design work at the sites, drawing on specific illustrations from the NTI sites. Finally we posit two related ideas. The first is the notion that as the NTI sites matured and developed a site-level "practice" of new teacher support, they did in fact achieve a high level of congruence between the NWP values and the design of their programs. The second is the idea that the dynamic relationship among the highly articulated core values, the infrastructure supplied by the NWP, and the emerging designs was made possible by a high cultural capacity and drove the overall NTI improvement process.

The Intended Audience for The Reports

Our intended audience covers a broad spectrum of people and interests. First and foremost are those involved directly in the NTI work, particularly the eighteen teams of people at each of the NTI sites and the members of the NTI leadership group. The reports are also intended to inform the broader NWP community. The community includes other sites that might be interested in learning about and starting support programs for new teachers, as well as the national level NWP leadership which is interested in the implications of the work of this initiative for the NWP network at large. Finally this series of reports may be of value to external audiences – to potential funders, policy-makers or educators who are interested in learning more about the design of new teacher support programs.