

Teachers' Assessments Of Professional Development Quality, Value, And Benefits:

Results From Seven Annual Surveys Of
Participants In National Writing Project
Summer Institutes

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Teachers' Assessments Of Professional Development Quality, Value, And Benefits: Results From Seven Annual Surveys Of Participants In National Writing Project Summer Institutes

The National Writing Project (NWP) is the nation's premier professional development network dedicated to improving the teaching of writing. The NWP network comprises nearly 200 local sites in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. This report presents the results of a seven-year survey study in which participating teachers judged the quality of NWP professional development institutes and assessed the benefits they, and ultimately their students, gained from participation.

The nation needs high quality professional development in writing

Education and business leaders, as well as the general public, all agree that writing skills are important to student success during and beyond their schooling, and that better writing instruction is a critical need in the nation's education system (National Commission on Writing, 2003, 2004, 2006; Belden Russonello & Stewart, 2007). There is also accepted research evidence that effective teachers are the greatest contributor to student achievement (Haycock, 1998). Aside from the need to recruit and retain high quality new teachers, there is a need to improve the teaching of writing through high quality professional development.

The NWP model depends upon the development of effective teacher leadership

The NWP offers over 7,000 professional development programs a year in the nation's schools, reaching over 92,000 individual teachers and serving over 135,000 total participants. To develop the capacity to offer this scale of programming, the 200 sites of the NWP support the development of classroom teachers as professional leaders. The entry point into a NWP site's teacher leadership cadre is a program called the invitational summer institute. Annually, over 3,000 teachers participate in NWP summer institutes. Among the responsibilities of institute participants is to continue studying the teaching of writing and expanding their professional repertoires of effective practices in their classrooms. Also among their responsibilities is to hone their professional judgment about effective practices and the benefits of high quality instruction for their students. Local NWP sites draw from this ever-expanding pool of leading practitioners—called teacher-consultants in the NWP—to offer a wide range of professional development programs in schools and districts in their service areas.

NWP summer institutes must be of high quality to contribute to teachers' development as leaders

The NWP model depends upon teacher leaders who can provide high quality professional development programs in schools. In the NWP model, effective teacher leadership is grounded in and derives from effective classroom practice. A critical contributor to the ability of NWP sites to support teacher-consultants is the quality of the summer institute model and program. Key attributes of the summer institute, therefore, are its quality and value as professional development for teachers with leadership potential, its ability to help teachers continue strengthening their practice and professional judgment, and ultimately its ability to help produce benefits for students.

This seven-year survey study addresses these attributes. It examines institute participants' judgments about the quality of NWP institutes and the benefits of the institutes for their teaching and professional growth. It also examines teachers' judgments about the benefits of their NWP participation for their students' learning. Further, it includes teachers' reports on their use of classroom practices that are statistically correlated with higher achievement on the 1998 and 2002 writing assessments of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the nation's report card, as well as teachers' assessments of the NWP institutes' influence on those practices. By asking for teachers' judgments about the general benefits for their students deriving from the NWP, as well as their use of classroom practices that are linked to higher achievement on a standard measure, we have two windows onto the connections that teachers make between high quality professional development, classroom practice, and student learning. Ultimately, studying these attributes of the summer institute enables us to assess the prospects for these leading teachers' development of capacity to provide high quality professional development in NWP programs in schools.

The judgments of over 22,000 teachers in NWP institutes

Teachers in NWP institutes were surveyed twice: once at the end of the summer institute and once toward the end of the subsequent school year, about 8 months after their participation¹. Findings reported here are from surveys of seven cohorts of NWP institute participants, from summer 2000 and school year 2002-03, through summer 2006 and school-year 2006-07, a total of 22,287 teachers. Our analysis takes a longitudinal perspective, asking whether institute quality varies or is consistent over time for different cohorts. Additionally, we compare the judgments of teachers with different characteristics—ethnic backgrounds, years of teaching experience, school levels, and subject area responsibilities—asking whether they have the same or different perspectives

¹ The full report explains the survey development. The survey forms appear in Appendices A and B.

about the quality of the institutes and the contributions of the institutes to their classroom practice and their students' learning.

Summary Findings

A. THE REPRESENTATIVE DIVERSITY OF THE NWP'S TEACHER LEADERSHIP POOL

Finding 1. NWP institutes attract and select teachers so as to build a leadership pool that represents the diversity of the teaching profession: A range of ethnic backgrounds that reflect those in the teaching force; all grade levels, K-16; the full range of teaching experience, from new teachers to veterans; and multiple subject areas, including and beyond the language arts. [pages 6-7]²

The 22,287 teachers included in this seven-year study have the following characteristics:

- **Ethnic background.** The pool of institute participants is slightly more ethnically diverse than the national teaching force, comprising 81% white teachers and 19% teachers of color.
- **Grade level.** The NWP, unlike other professional development programs, includes the full K-16 grade range. Within the K-12 range, institute participants are roughly equally drawn from elementary, middle, and high school grade levels; about 6% of institute participants teach at the college/university level.
- **Subject matter.** About 4 in 5 participants are language arts teachers or generalists who have primary responsibility for teaching writing and literacy. The other 1 in 5 participants teach in other subjects (science, math, and so on) or in special contexts where the overall development of literacy is important and where writing serves as an important mode of learning.
- **Teaching experience.** More than half of institute participants are veterans who bring considerable experience into their NWP sites. Over the seven-year period of the study, more than half of participants had been teaching 6 years or longer when they participated (20% had been teaching more than 15 years). Just less than half (45%) were entering the NWP professional community early in their careers, having been teaching 5 years or less when they participated.

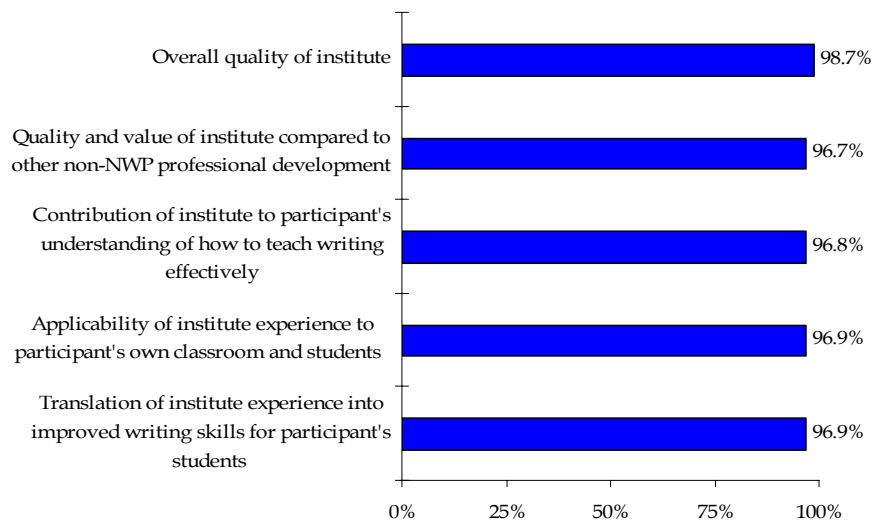
² Page ranges indicate where more detail appears in the full report. All data tables are in Appendix D.

B. TEACHERS’ CONSISTENTLY POSITIVE ASSESSMENTS OF THE QUALITY AND VALUE OF THE SUMMER INSTITUTE

Finding 2. On the summer institute survey, at least 96% of participants over the seven years made positive assessments of the NWP institute’s overall quality, its quality compared to non-NWP professional development, its contribution to their understanding of how to teach writing, its applicability to their classroom practice, and its prospects for translating into better writing for their students. The NWP institute model produces reliably positive experiences for teachers across sites and over time. [page 8.]

These strikingly positive results verify that NWP institutes are a good match for participants’ high-level professional expectations.

**Figure 1-ES.
Summer institute survey: Seven-year overall ratings of institute quality and value**



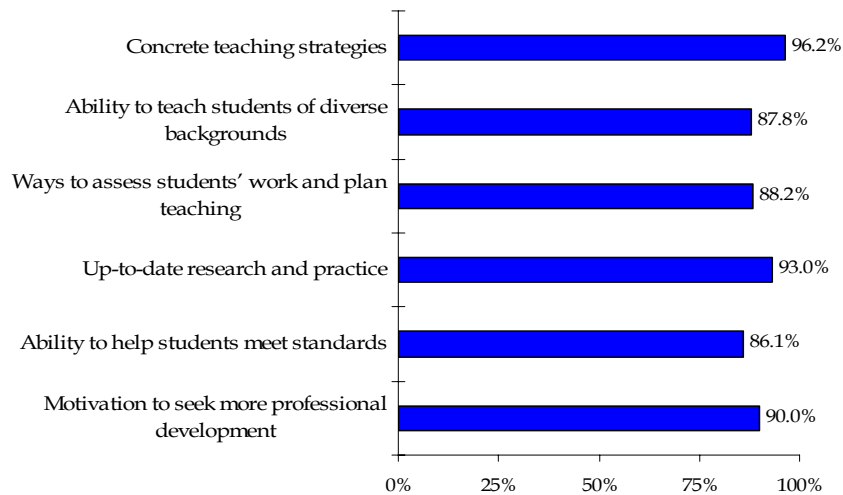
C. BENEFITS OF THE INSTITUTE TO TEACHERS BACK IN THE CLASSROOM

Finding 3. Eight months after the institutes, a very great majority of respondents find that their experience in the NWP has expanded their repertoires of classroom practice, enhanced their professional knowledge, and strengthened their ability to serve their students. [pages 9-11]

Teachers responded to a follow-up survey during the spring after their participation, on which they assessed the institute’s benefits to themselves as teachers. Over seven years, the very great majority of respondents found the institute to be beneficial in multiple ways that are important to their evolution as professional leaders. There were statistically significant differences across the full seven-year span for most benefits; however, these differences appeared as a pattern of fluctuations of quite small magnitude, rather than suggesting any consistent upward or downward trends.³

³ The full report includes displays of differences; Appendix D includes all data tables.

Figure 2-ES.
Follow-up survey: Seven-year overall assessment of benefits to teachers



Finding 4 Beyond helping teachers improve the teaching of writing, the institutes also helped most teachers address the broader literacy concerns of teaching reading and using technology. [pages 20-21]

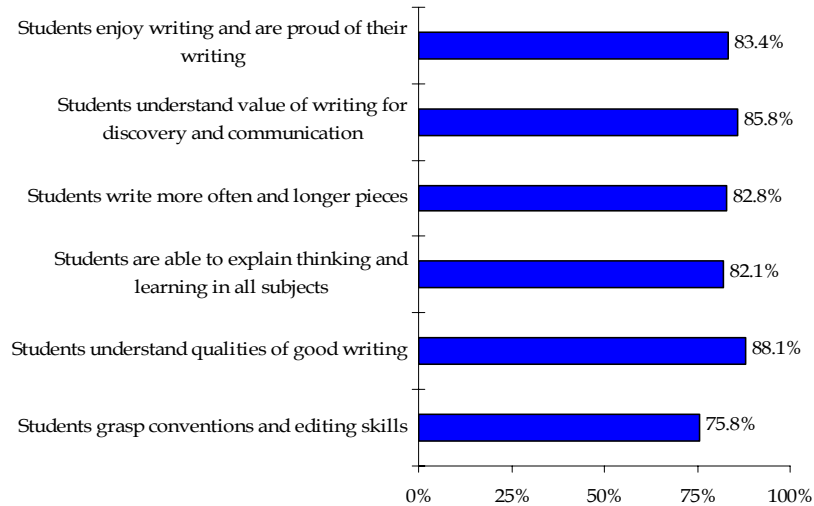
In 2004, because of new NWP initiatives in these areas, we added questions about reading instruction and computer use to the follow-up survey. Over the three years, 77% of teachers said that what they learned in NWP institute helped them become more effective in teaching reading, 66% said the institute helped them gain comfort in using computers for their own professional work, and 60% said the NWP institute helped them become more comfortable using computers for teaching.

D. NWP INSTITUTES' CONTRIBUTION TO THE IMPROVEMENT OF STUDENT WRITING

Finding 5 The great majority of teachers observe improvements in their students' attitudes, knowledge, productivity, and skills as writers because of what they, the teachers, gained from the NWP institutes. [pages 27-29]

On the follow-up survey 8 months into the school year, we asked teachers assess the extent to which their current students were more effective as writers than their former students because of what they, the teachers, had gained from the institute. For five of the six benefits, there was enough variation across the span of seven years to be statistically significant, but the pattern was of small fluctuations rather than a trend. The graph below shows that a great majority of teachers observed multiple benefits for their current students because of the NWP.

Figure 3-ES.
Follow-up survey: Seven -year overall assessment of benefits to students because of teachers' participation in the NWP



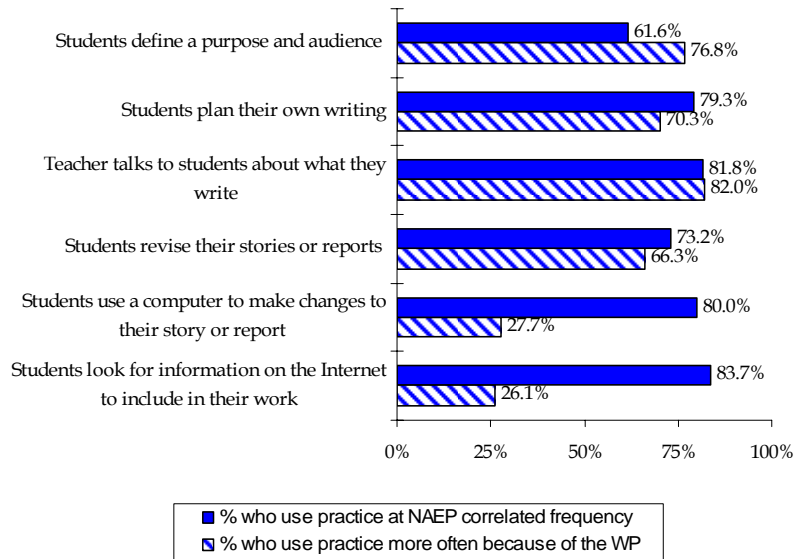
Finding 6. In the year following the institute, a substantial majority of NWP teachers report that they are using six specific classroom practices at the same frequencies that are correlated statistically to higher scores on the 2002 NAEP writing assessment. Teachers' reports suggest that many of them were using these practices before the institute and that the institute reinforced or increased their use. [pages 37-39]

The follow-up survey asked teachers to report how often they use several specific classroom practices. The survey instrument does not reveal that these practices were drawn from NAEP surveys nor that they are statistically correlated with higher NAEP achievement when they are used often. The survey also asked teachers about whether the NWP influenced them to use these practices less often, more often, or had no influence.

The results suggest that before the institute, most teachers were already having students plan and revise their writing, and were already having their students use computers for their writing. The NWP promoted even more use of planning and revising strategies. The NWP influence on more frequent computer use was comparatively weaker than on other practices, though this may have occurred because even "some" use of computers correlates with higher achievement, and teachers were already using computers at least sometimes. The institute had a strong positive influence on how often teachers talked with their students about their writing. The institute influenced most teachers to have students define an audience and purpose for their writing more than they did before, but about 2 in 5 teachers are not yet using this strategy at the degree of frequency ("often") that is linked to higher achievement on the NAEP.

In the graph below, the top bar indicates the proportion of respondents who reported using the practice at the same level of frequency that is correlated with higher achievement; the bottom bar shows the percentage who said the NWP influenced them to use this practice more often.

Figure 4-ES.
Follow-up Survey: Four-year⁴ results for the frequency of teachers' use of classroom practices associated with higher NAEP writing achievement, and the impact of the institute on increasing teachers' use of those practices



E. THE GENERAL CONSISTENCY OF TEACHERS' ASSESSMENTS ACROSS DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS

Finding 7. Across the seven years, teachers made similarly positive assessments of the benefits of the institute for themselves and ultimately for their students, regardless of their ethnic background, years of teaching experience, subject area, and grade level. Within the dominant pattern of consistency across groups, there were some small fluctuations and occasionally a slight trend for one subgroup group to differ from another. [pages 12-18, 22-26, 30-36]

Teachers of all backgrounds made quite similar judgments about the benefits of NWP institutes to themselves as teachers and ultimately for their students. Lack of difference across groups was the strongly predominant trend. There were minor fluctuations in teachers' ratings across the years but they were small in magnitude and did not reflect upward or downward trends. There were occasional differences across some respondent groups for some benefits. For example, there is a very slight trend toward greater benefits to K-12 teachers and their students than to college teachers, and elementary and

⁴ Because of changes in survey questions following the NAEP 2002 assessment, we have four years (rather than seven) of consistent data on this set of questions.

middle school teachers are very slightly more likely than upper grades teachers to find the institutes applicable to the teaching of reading.

The occasional differences that appear for one item or another are reassuring in that they suggest that teachers were making considered judgments about the value of the institute for their distinct teaching context and professional trajectory. The overall pattern of consistency reflects an institute model that is reliably strong and well implemented across the NWP network year in and year out.

The National Writing Project As A Valuable National Resource For Education

Teachers who participate in NWP institutes comprise the leadership pool that NWP sites draw upon to deliver professional development programs to teachers in their local service areas. Further, NWP institute participants become mainstays in the education system: Research has shown that 98% stay in education until they retire, and 70% stay in the classroom throughout their careers. Of those who leave the classroom, 83% work in leadership positions at the school level. Moreover, 72% continue to work or volunteer in education after their retirement (LeMahieu, et al., 2008). The leadership of NWP teacher-consultants is not transitory; rather, it is a long-term resource for the improvement of teaching. It is vital, therefore, that the summer institute model and experience be effective because it is the entry point to NWP sites' development of teacher-leadership.

Findings from this survey make a strong case that the summer institute serves its purpose very well:

First, the institutes attract a wide range of teachers, and these teachers benefit from the institute regardless of differences in their backgrounds and contexts. This finding is significant because the NWP wants the leadership pool to reflect the diversity of needs and teaching contexts of teachers in the schools—teachers who will be participants in NWP programs led one day by these institute graduates.

Second, what teachers gain from the institutes is multi-faceted. They gain concrete strategies they can use right away, and beyond that, they gain up-to-date research and the motivation to continue professional learning. These results indicate that the institutes act as powerful launching pads for long-term professional growth. Importantly, in-depth qualitative research on the relationship between summer institutes and teacher classroom practice verifies and elaborates on this survey finding (Lieberman and Wood, 2003).

Third, NWP teachers are using teaching practices in their classrooms that are broadly accepted as effective and that contribute to student achievement. And while the institutes are reinforcing and promoting such practices, it is also the case that many participants

were using them at least to some extent when they entered the program. That is, these teachers are not novices beginning to adopt effective practices; rather, the institutes build teacher leadership on a foundation of teaching experience. Teacher-leadership anchored in effective practice is the essence of the NWP model.

Fourth, the institutes provide a valuable experience and multiple benefits to teachers every year. This level of productivity reflects a mature NWP network that has accumulated very high capacity: It produces high quality programming reliably, and does so at a national scale. The NWP is a sizable engine generating a steady stream of teacher leadership into the nation's education system year in and year out.

Reflection from a broader perspective

These seven annual surveys are one strand in an ongoing history of evaluation and research on the National Writing Project conducted by ourselves and other researchers⁵. In our nearly 25 years in the business of education evaluation, we have studied dozens of federal, state, and local projects that focus on the professional development of teachers in writing, mathematics, science, and other subjects, including some that bring K-12 and higher education institutions together or emphasize the development of teacher leadership.⁶ When we consider the results of research on the NWP in light of research on other projects, we see that the NWP is unique not only in its scale, its longevity, and its adherence to principles that are respectful of teachers and the complexity of their work, but very importantly, the NWP is unique in its organizational capacity to produce, year after year, high quality professional development programs. The NWP functions as a robust infrastructure for the improvement of the teaching profession and, as such, we see it is a valuable and vital national resource.

The NWP will continue to face challenges as it seeks to expand its reach to even more teachers, to grow professional development programs that are increasingly helpful to teachers in the age of digital literacy and worldwide communication, and in all ways to continue striving to serve teachers of students who are disadvantaged by poor access to high quality literacy education. The summer institute will remain the well-spring and generator of the teacher leadership that the NWP needs to strengthen the profession and improve student writing. Thus, ongoing measurements of its quality will remain vital to the

⁵ Other NWP evaluations assess improvement on samples of student writing, as well studying classroom practices. The Academy for Educational Development completed a three-year study of the NWP in 2002 that included a writing assessment. The NWP's own Local Site Research Initiative has involved 19 NWP sites since 2003 in comparative studies examining gains on pre- and post-tests. In 2007, the NWP commissioned an independent \$5.5 million, five-year national evaluation focusing on writing improvement in schools that work with NWP sites. For information on these and more, see the Results page at www.nwp.org.

⁶ See www.inverness-research.org.

overall health of the national infrastructure. New surveys of summer institute participants should go beyond classroom teaching and assess the extent to which and the ways in which institutes help participants develop emerging skills and attitudes of professional leadership for their NWP sites and for change agency in their workplaces.

Inverness Research

Inverness Research is a national education research and evaluation group headquartered in Inverness, California, in the San Francisco Bay Area. We study investments that are made in the improvement of education, seeking to document the benefits of those investments at multiple levels, from system capacity to the classroom. For over 12 years we have collected data on NWP programs and participants, as well as conducting studies of NWP initiatives such as Project Outreach, the New Teacher Initiative and the Technology Initiative. The surveys that we report on here represent one facet of our long-term evaluation of the NWP. See www.inverness-research.org.