



WriterCoach Connection™ Class Notes

Winter 2008

A Program of Community Alliance for Learning

Media Academy, Oakland

Even after only one session at our first site in Oakland, Media students were asking for “my coach” at the second session. It was the end of a busy Halloween week, so we had a few coach no-shows and we were surprised the kids noticed. Some commented, “My coach isn’t here!”

If you ever wondered about the impact and value of the one-on-one connection between a coach and a student, there would be no question in your mind if you’d been with us last week. We are fortunate at Media to have a strong, committed English teacher in Sonja Totten-Harris; a diverse and eager group of students; and an enthusiastic, hands-on principal in Ben Schmookler, who has eased the way for WCC at Media. In fact, he announced in one of our start-up meetings, “My mom wants to coach.”

And his mom is one of a diverse and engaged group of forty-plus coaches who answered the call to help students in OUSD write better. We’ve got a former president of Wheaton College; a coach for the girls’ basketball team at the school; members of the Coast Guard; published poets and writers; journalists and former teachers; and a talented group of other folks from the community.

And “community,” we’re fast learning, is the key word at Media. It’s something we all count on. Even the security guards at the school gate asked for WCC t-shirts, and promised to wear them. We anticipated we might have trouble attracting volunteers for WCC in Oakland. Boy, were we wrong. The community let us know in no uncertain terms, “You can count on us!”

— Lisa Anvey/ Clara Sneed, Media Site Co-coordinators ■

King Middle School, Berkeley

Enthusiastic new volunteers joined King’s many loyal veterans to make the start up of the coaching year in mid-October a great success. Six teams of coaches met with the students of 12 English classes and worked with them on a variety of assignments, from getting started on book evaluations in Ms. Felarca’s classes to planning revisions on two successive drafts of Mr. Conley’s “No More Homework” essay. Teachers told me they could tell right away how much coaching had helped most kids move ahead with their work and meet higher expectations of themselves as writers. (See next column.)

Berkeley High School

Q: What makes writer coaching successful?

A: A dynamic group of coaches, enthusiastic students and supportive teachers.

If this is true, then Berkeley High School has what it takes. With our first sessions for the 9th and 10th grade classes of Community Partnerships Academy under our belt, we are already receiving rave reviews from both students and teachers. With many returning coaches from last year and an enthusiastic and highly competent crop of new coaches, our team is very impressive. After our first day of coaching her 10th grade classes, teacher Susannah Bell said she was thrilled. “The students kept coming by my room and talking about their experience with their coach. I think it was very empowering for them, as I heard them speaking very proudly of their writing. A couple of the students got the same coaches as last year and it seemed to reinforce the good feeling they were having about themselves, since in those cases the coach commented on how they had grown as writers.... I mean, most of them (kids and coaches) were beaming after the session. Next time I will bring my camera!” What a great note to start the year!

— Sabib-Amar Khalsa, BHS Site Coordinator ■

King, (cont’d)

Sometimes I’m able to take a little break from coaching to observe and listen, and what I see and hear is inspiring. In light-filled Room 125, every table and countertop is taken up with adults and students sitting side by side having warm conversations about the students’ ideas and how they are expressed. This being Berkeley, the pairs were particularly animated when we worked on Mr. Selk’s election-issues assignment, with both students and coaches well informed and passionate. Considering how serious we are about our work, it’s surprising and delightful to see so much smiling going on.

More coaches are being trained now, and a number of other members of our very supportive King community have said they will come on board after the holidays. We look forward to having them join us.

---Kathleen Hallam, King Site Coordinator ■

Willard Middle School, Berkeley

We started the year off with a bang at Willard on October 16 and 17 with a fabulous mix of eager seasoned and new coaches, including a super crop of Cal students. The 8th graders have been quite enthusiastic about coaching and many have already established bonds with their coaches. It's always rewarding to look around the coaching room and see students actively engaged with their coaches, one on one. So far we've worked on Autobiographical Incidents, Persuasive Essays on Junk Food in School, Letters to the Future President, and Book Reviews. Teachers continue to appreciate the increase in completed turned-in work after coaching sessions.

—Jeanine Brown, WMS Site Coordinator ■

Albany High School

"Wow, I missed this -- it's so good to be back working with students again," beamed one returning coach after working with three different students on a challenging *Maltese Falcon* essay. The other coaches on the team echoed the sentiment, and spent a few minutes debriefing and sharing ideas with the two newest coaches to join the team. As we start the sixth year of writer coaching at Albany High School, the usual irregular and fluid conditions prevail. We coach on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, primarily meeting with the sixteen 9th-grade English classes, with three of the five teachers new to the 9th grade program. We're also occasionally available for seven other mixed-grade classes of English language learners, whose students and teacher are especially appreciative. Of our roster of 45 wonderful and flexible coaches, 11 are new to coaching this year. Between mid-October and November 6, we completed over 330 individual coaching sessions! We hope to see most 9th grade English students about six times each by the end of April.

—Teresa Barnett/Peg Healy, AHS Site Co-coordinators ■

Longfellow Middle School, Berkeley

Coaching is in full gallop at Longfellow, where our 50 volunteers work, laugh, and share their love of words with five eighth-grade and five seventh-grade classes. A few of the older kids we coached last year even smiled and waved at their former coaches when we entered their classrooms in October; to be not only remembered, but remembered fondly is an unexpected and treasured gift. Seeing the kids grow from semi-sweet 'tweens to oh-so-cool teens is only one of the myriad benefits of coaching both grades.

So far this year we've helped the seventh graders review and revise their district writing assessments ("Oh, yeah, I guess maybe I did forget to write a thesis statement.");

Longfellow (cont'd)

describe their favorite color ("I like red because it's so brave and from my heart . . ."); and compose compare-and-contrast paragraphs ("Do you think I should do it on my dog and my hamster or on Islam and Christianity?"). The eighth-graders have been working hard on personal essays about turning points in their lives; argumentative essays on whether to abolish the electoral college; and persuasive essays on George's killing of Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*. Little did our new coaches know they would become experts on so many subjects so very quickly.

We sometimes just look at each other and smile, unable to believe our great good fortune in being able to do such good work with such amazing volunteers, teachers, and kids. We are truly grateful.

---Annie Stine/Mark Pasley, LMS Site Co-coordinators ■

Albany Middle School

Sometimes the fall brings heat and sometimes it brings rain, but one thing is sure: at Albany Middle School fall brings writer coaches to the 8th grade English classes!

Newly trained coaches join an ever-growing cadre of experienced coaches in our third year at AMS. So far this year we have been able to work on several assignments that have helped us to get to know the students. We have coached them on an essay exploring "Three Sides of Me," where the students write about one of their characteristics from the perspective of someone who knows them well. We started working with them on their Mandala project where students explore their sun and shadow sides through animals, weather, plants, and so on. We also got to know what is important to our students in the letters they wrote to the next president to be published on Google Docs.

Students have also been able to bring their own voice to history studies by writing a children's book describing Columbus' first meeting with the Americans. Their creativity is stretched on their work on a newspaper inspired by their reading of "The Light in the Forest," written partially from the perspective of the Native Americans and in part from the perspective of the white settlers.

We have been in every 8th grade class so far. In the 375 coaching sessions conducted so far, we have been able to coach almost every 8th grade student at AMS. Not a bad way to kick off the fall!

—Karen Larson/Nancy Whitney, AMS Site Co-coordinators ■