

Contra Costa Times

September 2, 2012

WriterCoach to make local debut at Richmond High School this fall

By Robert Rogers



Dale Rogers Marshall, right, coaches Chararath Kong at Fremont High School in Oakland.

RICHMOND -- A novel program has been inching toward this city for some time, amassing accolades along the way.

This fall, it's officially here.

The WriterCoach Connection program began in Berkeley in 2001, then expanded to Oakland and Albany. El Cerrito High was the first school in West Contra Costa to adopt it, in 2010, after parents began lobbying for the program there.

Now, it's Richmond's turn.

"The Richmond community has been very responsive," said Shelli Fried, Richmond volunteer coordinator for the program. "We had a target of 60 volunteer writing coaches at Richmond High, and we thought that might be tough. But we are thrilled that we have more than 90 (coaches)."

WriterCoach Connection is a nonprofit education program that works with area schools by training volunteers and having them work with students and teachers to improve writing, comprehension and critical thinking skills.

Inspired by a writer-coach program in New Jersey that had garnered growing attention among education professionals, Mary Lee Cole, a parent and educator with a P.h.D., developed WriterCoach Connection and introduced the program at Berkeley High School in February 2001.

Starting with 35 trained community volunteers and six English teachers, coaches at Berkeley High began working with 180 students, and word soon spread about coaching results.

The nonprofit organization Community Alliance for Learning (CAFL), headed by Robert Menzimer, was formed to administer the program.

"Mary Lee thought that if this model could work in New Jersey, it could work here too," said Menzimer, who took the reins when Cole stepped down in 2006.

The program initially took root in Berkeley High with 35 trained community volunteers and six English teachers and 180 students. As grades and test scores rose, word quickly spread.

Today, 530 volunteers and more than 2,000 students at middle and high schools in El Cerrito, Berkeley, Oakland and Albany are involved. The program combines volunteers with full and part-time administrators.

The overall program budget is just over \$400,000. About half the budget comes from grants, Menzimer said, with the other half a blend of school contracts and donations.

"The budget pays for everything that's necessary to get more than 500 community volunteers recruited, trained and organized so that every one of them knows which classroom to show up in on which day and at which hour at which of our 12 sites in four school districts," Menzimer said.

The staff is 2.66 full-time equivalents and 24 part-time contractors, including site and volunteer coordinators, coach trainers and a grant writer.

At Richmond High, the program will make its debut with about 150 students this fall. Fried and Menzimer said the volunteers represent a cross-section of Richmond parents and adults concerned about education, as well as some coaches from nearby cities.

The new coaches attend two training sessions, three hours each. The training provides strategies and practice to work effectively with students at all levels of achievement and all stages of the writing process, according to Menzimer.

Fernando Ramirez, a former Richmond High student, is now a volunteer writing coach and outreach worker for the program. Ramirez said Richmond residents and parents have embraced the concept. He said local churches and ethnic festivals were some of the places where he was most successful in recruiting volunteers.

Menzimer said Richmond High seemed like a natural fit. When West Contra Costa school district Superintendent Bruce Harter expressed interest in Menzimer bringing his program to Richmond High, he jumped at the chance.

Now that the program has drawn the requisite volunteers and seems poised to take hold at Richmond High, the city of Richmond has approached Menzimer about partnering for grant applications through Cities of Service.

Menzimer said the overture bodes well. The city made news in recent years by taking the unusual step of using general fund moneys to subsidize schools, especially Kennedy High School, which was on the verge of closing because of budget cuts in 2010.

Menzimer said he is hopeful that after his program makes an impact at Richmond High, he'll be able to establish it at Kennedy as well.

"Partnering on the grant is a significant development for us because it's the first time a municipality has stepped up to generate funding for the WCC," Menzimer said. "Richmond is really a city on the move."

Contact Robert Rogers at 510-262-2726 or rrogers@bayareanewsgroup.com. Follow him at [Twitter.com/roberthrogers](https://twitter.com/roberthrogers)

How to help: Visit www.writercoachconnection.org or contact directly at writercoachconnect@yahoo.com or 510-524-2319.