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Community Organization Writing the Ship at Richmond High and Beyond

With coaches returning to the classroom and new standards on the way, a renewed focus on literacy skills

RICHMOND — Richmond High School and other East Bay students will be getting a writing boost.

This year, more than 650 volunteer coaches from WriterCoach Connection (WCC) are supporting about 2,200 students in nine East Bay schools in Albany, Berkeley, El Cerrito, Oakland and Richmond.

At Richmond High School, more than 100 local, trained volunteers returned to classrooms October 2 for the program's second year of giving one-on-one writing instruction to the school's students.

Both the coaching and connections are strong: Local volunteers — parents, lawyers, university students, retired educators, writers and other working or retired professionals, who have received six hours of training to become successful writing coaches, form deep bonds with their local public schools. Students receive tips and suggestions on their writing assignments and gain competence and confidence to improve their writing and critical thinking skills, empower their self-expression and prepare them for success. Teachers love the individual attention coaches give to students that they can't provide on their own, especially in an era of overcrowded classrooms and tight school budgets.

"WriterCoach Connection works," says West Contra Costa Unified School District Superintendent Bruce Harter. "Everyone wins, and we need more of it."

Results prove the program is indeed working. At Richmond High last year, the rate of students passing out of English Language Development classes into mainstream ones after receiving writer coaching was 48 percent; the usual figures are roughly estimated at between 25 to 35 percent. The high school has expanded the writer coach program to serve four mainstream English classes this year in two of the school's academies.

"The numbers just blew me away," said former Richmond High Vice Principal Kibby Kleiman, now the principal at Pinole Valley High School. "These students have been getting stuck in the writing curriculum for a long time. These results mean that they can now take their academy elective (Sports Medicine, Civil Engineering, Advanced Film) instead of a second English class. This in turn leads students to a

richer academic career and college or career path.”

The WriterCoach program drives improved writing achievement in regular classes as well. For example, at nearby El Cerrito High School, writing-assessment essays administered at the beginning and end of English courses in the 2012–13 school year demonstrated that mainstream students served by WCC in the fall raised their writing-skill levels by an average 9.5 percent; spring semester students increased scores 10 percent; and English Language Development students’ average scores climbed 12 percent.

New Common Core Standards, which will be implemented in California schools during the next academic year, are expected to further boost student writing and critical-thinking skills. Karolyn Langston-Haynes, a teacher from Richmond’s Grant Elementary, expects that the Common Core English Language Development (ELD) standards will place “more emphasis on writing across the curriculum.”

Since 2001, WriterCoach Connection has served more than 22,000 middle and high school students, making it the largest continuing Bay Area program dedicated to school writing support. For additional information about WriterCoach Connection, visit the organization’s website at www.writercoachconnection.org

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