

and America's Promise Alliance spotlights a crucial factor in meeting the school dropout challenge: "The majority of teachers and principals felt increasing their schools' parental outreach programs would do a lot to reduce the number of high school dropouts. Many believed the parent-school relationship was the key to boosting student performance in school." A hallmark of WCC is the structure it provides for parents to form a firm bond with their public schools.

Writing instruction is crucial in all of this. A study in the journal *Science* and described in the *NY Times* on April 16, 2009 reported that seventh graders who were struggling in class did significantly better after performing a series of confidence-building writing exercises, and the improvements continued through eighth grade. The students who benefited most were African Americans who were doing poorly, an indication of the effectiveness of writing support in addressing the achievement gap.

The National Council of Teachers of English is helping address the need by crafting the LEARN Act, which has been introduced in Congress. The Act recognizes that academic success depends on the development of writing and other literacy skills and promotes literacy support to address the specific learning needs of struggling writers and readers. There's no better example of such literacy support than WriterCoach Connection.

Answering the coaching call

It starts all over town. All over several towns, in fact. At Berkeley's Juneteenth Festival, at Oakland's Art & Soul Festival, at the Solano Stroll stretching from Berkeley into Albany. At Neighborhood Crime Prevention Council meetings all over Oakland. At UC Berkeley, Berkeley City College, Mills College, Laney College. At the Albany Art & Music Festival, the Oakland Schools Volunteer Faire, the Watershed Poetry Festival, Peralta Hacienda Historical Park festivals and others across the map. If three or more people are rubbing shoulders in the East Bay, chances are they'll run into a WriterCoach Connection coach recruiting table.

This fall, WCC volunteer director Lynn Mueller and dozens of writer coaches handed out piles of literature and newsletters, told coaching stories, and brought onboard an astonishing total of 166 new writer coaches, including 41 students from UC Berkeley. (Our middle school and high school students LOVE their Cal coaches!)

If you missed the boat this time around, no problemo: spring coach training sessions are already scheduled from mid-January to the end of February. Signing up is easy! Just head for the WCC website at <http://www.writercoachconnection.org/> and click on "Volunteer" from the menu at the left. Or call Lynn at 510.524.2319.

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WriterCoach Connection™

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WRITER COACH CONNECTION

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The left column view

'Tis the season, and we are surrounded by gifts—lots of them. They include volunteer CAFL board and advisory board members, hard-working teachers finding extra time (when they have no extra time) to work with our site coordinators to create assignments specifically designed for writer-coach support, those same site coordinators and their coach-trainer colleagues, school administrators who scour the landscape for WCC funding support, and especially our 400 volunteer coaches, who light up our students' eyes with confidence in their developing skills as effective young writers.

But there's another group of gifts that really stops me in my tracks. They typically arrive in little envelopes, pre-printed with our address and found nestled in this newsletter. They come from all over the East Bay and beyond—from Pennsylvania, from Washington, D.C., from New York—I'm amazed when I see these return addresses. These gifts, of course, are donation checks, or clicks on the Donate Now buttons all over our website (www.writercoachconnection.org). They are from our own volunteers (OMG, generosity on steroids), and from far-flung friends and family members responding to what our volunteers and associates say about WriterCoach Connection.

'Tis the season to be grateful, to you, for these crucial gifts. And believe me, on behalf of the students and teachers we serve, we are.

Bob

Robert Menzimer
Executive Director
Community Alliance for Learning

Homegrown coaching

Oakland journalist Reginald James is coaching on his turf. He says, *"Writing, like reading, really does open up a new world. It helped me find my voice and learn more about myself. I wanted to share that experience with young people in Oakland."*

An Oakland native, Reginald describes his coaching experience in terms of community commitment, of deepening his roots: *"While it is great to have volunteers from all walks of life, sometimes young people feel they can relate better to someone who may look like them and speak their language, too (Oaktown Teen Turfanese). I'm aware of the psychological significance of students seeing a responsible, young Black man in the classroom promoting literacy. It's already rare to have men in many of these classrooms, but to have a young man of color – that happens to be pretty fresh – in the class, it adds an additional credibility. It emphasizes the message of developing writing skills."*

As a journalist, he recognizes what is unique about the WriterCoach Connection approach, noting, *"The philosophy used when coaching writers*

is unique. People often expect people to write their papers for them when they get feedback on their writing, but not here. The goal is to help writers strengthen their own voice and express themselves."

Reginald sees beyond the connection he clearly makes with his students. He says, *"I like knowing that I will be able*



Coach Reginald James guides a Media Academy student's Senior research project.

to inspire someone to use their voice, and who knows who they will inspire? It also can encourage them to volunteer in the future." And he demonstrates a clear view of the coaching big picture when he says, *"All in all, I want to encourage young people to find their voice, because young folks are too often missing from the discussion. And more often than not, the issues will affect them now, and later."*

Coaching returns to Albany

Like districts everywhere beset by woefully inadequate state education funding, the Albany school district this year faced a severe budget shortage, with the loss of \$4.2 million, fully 13% of its budget. To meet the challenge, the district was forced to divert for core expenses the parcel tax funding that had supported numerous programs, including WriterCoach Connection at Albany High and Albany Middle School. The apparent result: no writer coaches at AHS and AMS for 2009-10. However, the Albany Middle School community refused to accept the loss of WCC and allocated scarce PTA and Site Council dollars to provide writer coaches for all eighth graders in support of their I-Search projects this spring.

Meantime, a coalition of community members placed two new parcel tax measures on the Nov. 3 ballot to restore some of the programs lopped off by the budget axe. The measures passed resoundingly. The vote means that support for some programs that lost parcel-tax funding this year will be restored, but the tax measures do not provide enough revenue to restore all programs. Staff and community members from each school will determine how to allocate the new parcel-tax dollars for the 2010-11 school year. Given the high regard for WCC among school administrators and teachers and the unwavering dedication of Albany writer coaches, we remain hopeful that our coaches will return to the hallways and classrooms of AHS and AMS next year. Meantime, our coaches look forward to sitting down this spring with AMS students to guide them on their I-Search projects.

**WCC needs your support!
Donate Now at
www.writercoachconnection.org**

Talking about money

Our next WCC money-raising event (they never stop, do they?) will be a talk ... about money. On Sunday, January 10, Marty Schiffenbauer, investment advisor, former financial columnist for the *Bay Guardian*, and friend of WriterCoach Connection, will give a workshop on investment strategies in confusing times.

Where should you put your savings in this low-interest-rate, uncertain economic environment? Marty will share his somewhat contrarian views on the pros and cons of stocks, gold, bonds (including Treasury Inflation-Protected Securities), as well as other investments.

Marty has followed the world of Wall Street since his infancy. In addition to writing for the *Bay Guardian*, he has managed the endowment of a charitable trust. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration and a Doctorate in Experimental Psychology. Currently retired, he continues to monitor the financial markets closely.

The workshop will be from 3 to 6 p.m., in central Berkeley. Suggested donation is \$20 at the door. To RSVP, and for more information (including location), contact Kathy Kahn, kathykahn@sbcglobal.net, or 510.524.9270.



Believe it: the gospel from CP Academy at Berkeley High

No one knows more about the effectiveness of WriterCoach Connection than an educator in the middle of the program. From her mouth to your ear, here is the testimony of Community Partnerships Academy Coordinator Annie Johnston at Berkeley High:

“WriterCoach Connection has transformed our English curriculum. The one-on-one feedback the coaches have been able to provide to every student in our 9th and 10th grades has been primarily responsible for the dramatic increase in students willing to push themselves to try our AP English Augmentation. After two years of writing coaches, we saw a significant jump, from 30% to 60% of our junior class, signing up for AP English Augmentation. These students voluntarily get themselves to school at 7:30 in the morning twice a week, and take on hours of additional work each week in order to improve their writing skills. Over 70% of these students started out below grade level in English Language Arts. Without writer coaches mentoring them, building their skills and their self confidence, we would not be seeing this kind of commitment. WriterCoach Connection lays a crucial foundation for our Writing for College Program at the ninth and tenth grade level.”

Word!



Annie Johnston, Coordinator of Community Partnerships Academy at Berkeley High, says CP Academy students are signing up for AP English Augmentation in record numbers, and WCC is a big part of it.

Teachers who coach

by Lynn Mueller

"I promised I would join the coaching corps when I retired," says former Berkeley High English teacher Leorah Abouav-Zilberman, a twinkle in her blue eyes, "and I did."

Following a 32-year teaching career, Leorah completed WCC's volunteer training this fall and found herself back in the classroom, this time sitting side by side with a single student rather than in front of thirty.

While WriterCoach Connection has attracted a fair number of retired or part-time teachers, Leorah and her teaching colleague Martha Cain were drawn to volunteer because of the difference WCC coaching made in their own classrooms.

Leorah explains, "I found coaching helped students who wouldn't otherwise turn in an assignment to get something in. And that gave me something to build on."

"I think most teachers agree that the essay return rate is higher with writer coaches," affirms Martha, who has worked with WCC coaches for the past seven years in her Longfellow Middle School classroom.

"Turning in their writing assignments is a reflection of students becoming more confident with their writing. And when there is a level of completion, students don't fail. Their grades begin to improve."

On special assignment during her sabbatical this year, Martha coordinates the district's middle school writing assessments, for which she has found WCC volunteers "invaluable" in helping with essay scoring. She hopes to coach at all three Berkeley middle schools and glean insights about writing assignments and coaching instructions that she can take back to teachers.

WCC helps teachers craft compelling assignments. In a poetry unit last spring,

Martha asked her students to compare similar things using all five senses. One student was struggling, but after meeting with his writing coach, says Martha, "He wrote the most fabulous poem." It began,



Leorah Abouav-Zilberman (left), retired, and her colleague Martha Cain guide Longfellow eighth grader Bryan McKetney.

'Jazz is a summer breeze cooling the mind/. . . Hip-hop is relentless and crazed like yellow fever.'

"WCC forces teachers to be more organized and more articulate about their assignments since they are communicating not just with the students in their classroom but with a group of people who are coming from the outside to support them." This higher level of preparedness encourages more collaboration among teachers, she observes. "I heard you had a great assignment," a teacher might say. It creates cross fertilization of ideas."

The conversation the kids have with their coaches, the questioning that draws them out, is key, Martha believes. "The evidence is on the page," she asserts. "The overall quality of their writing is better."

"There's nothing better than to have an audience for your writing," concurs Leorah. "A non-judgmental listener can encourage a student in a stronger way than a teacher can in a class of thirty." She concludes, "The WCC program should be in every school, at every level. From third grade on, students would benefit."