



# WRITER COACH CONNECTION

A Program of Community Alliance for Learning | 2013-14

## The Left Column View

We're in our 14th year now...

we've trained hundreds upon hundreds of community volunteers as writer coaches and helped thousands of students to greater writing proficiency. But I still can't get over it when I step into a classroom or school library and see two-person teams of people, one student and one coach each, dotted all over the room, locked in concentration, buzzing with conversation.

The kids get it — they know the coaches are volunteers and are there because they care. We get it, too — we know the value of the confidence we see building in our young writers as the year progresses, the higher rates of assignment turn-in, the rising grades. We know what this attention to their students means to hard-working teachers facing crowded classrooms. And we get the value of literally bringing community into schools. But I still can't get over it. I see a roomful of students and coaches and think, "Look what they're doing!"

And, if you're a coach or a donor, my thought is, Look what YOU'RE doing!

*Bob*

Robert Menzimer  
Executive Director

## More Coaching for More Kids

We started with 35 volunteer coaches and 180 students at Berkeley High in 2000–01. This year: more than 600 coaches and more than 2,000 students, working together in a line that stretches south from Richmond to El Cerrito, Albany, Berkeley and Oakland.

The growth of WriterCoach Connection has been organic: a school benefits from coaching, another one hears about it. Emails, phone calls and meetings ensue, and the next thing we know, we're in another school.



*More writer coaches, like Jen Chou, right, have helped expand the program at Berkeley High, where it all began in 2001.*

Well, it's not exactly "the next thing we know." We prefer to take a year to plan WCC for a school that's new to us, although we've been asked to do it faster, and we have. But the list of planning steps is a long one, and considerations include whether the program has the full backing of school administrators and teachers, space, viable volunteer pools and, of course, funding.

So far in our history, the answers all have been "yes" at a dozen schools in four districts, and that list of schools will likely get longer soon. Pending a national Cities of Service Partnership grant with the City of Richmond, we'll be serving mainstream classes at Richmond's Kennedy High School in Fall 2014. And pending funding from the school, we will be sending our writer coaches into another Oakland school, Life Academy, this spring.

Our dream is more coaching for more kids, and we've learned that if you show up, so will they. 

# A 'Gold Standard' Assessment Shows El Cerrito Students Gaining

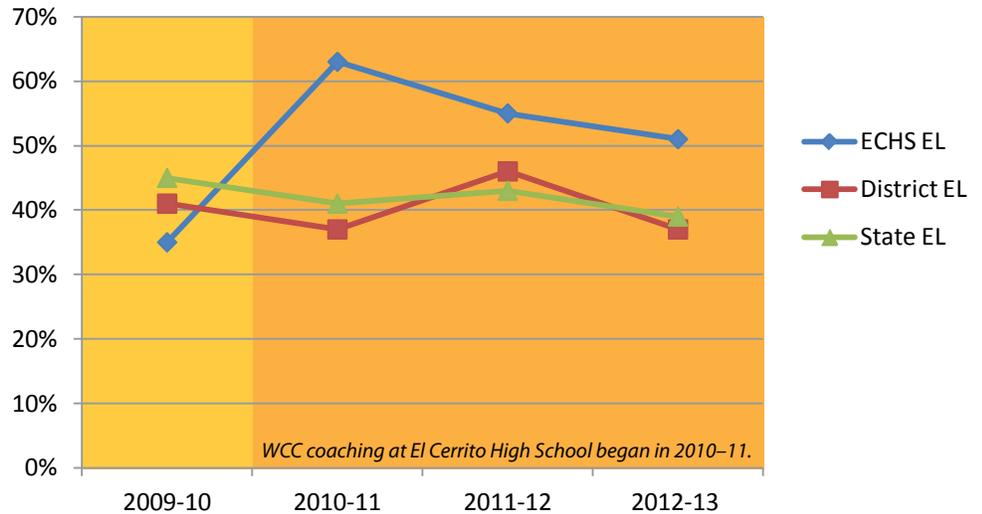
**The results are positive for our largest and most ambitious writing assessment ever.**

Last year, WriterCoach Connection and the El Cerrito High School English Department (ECHS) collaborated on a pre- and post-coaching "gold standard" essay assessment for all their ninth grade classes and English Language Development 4 students. Students wrote a timed essay near the beginning of the term. At the end, after participating in 10 or more coaching conferences, they wrote another essay of the same genre. By comparing the pre- and post-coaching scores of those students who completed both essays, we were able to track the growth of their writing skills.

English Department faculty chose the two writing tasks from a collection of sample prompts released by the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) program. Teachers agreed on comparable test conditions, with 45 minutes to write each essay. The four-point CAHSEE rubric (4 = advanced, 3 = proficient, 2 = basic, 1 = below basic) was used to evaluate students' essays.

Fall pre- and post-coaching essays were scored in December and January by the same group of dedicated El Cerrito coaches, joined by Curt Douglas, chair of the ECHS English Department. Each reading began with a norming session. Readers reviewed the CAHSEE scoring rubric and practiced applying it holistically to a set of sample student essays. Each essay was scored by at

ECHS CAHSEE ELA 10th Grade English Learners



least by two readers — three, if the first two scores differed substantially. ECHS English teachers followed the same rubric to score spring essays, then Mr. Douglas calculated the initial results of both sets of essays.

Test results were tallied for the 185 students who completed the pre- and post-coaching essays in six mainstream English classes and one ELD 4 class in fall, and in three mainstream classes in spring. The scores of mainstream students rose an average of 9.5 percent in fall and 10 percent in spring.

The greatest gains were achieved in classes where initial scores were the lowest (an average of 2 or below). In ELD 4, scores rose 12 percent,

from 2.01 to 2.42. In the two lowest-scoring fall classes, the average gain was 16 percent, from 1.95 to 2.6. And the spring class that began with an average of 2.08 gained 20 percent to end with a score of 2.9 — from "basic" to the threshold of proficiency in one semester.

These results confirm what our partner teachers have been telling us for years: WCC coaches help teachers strengthen the skills and confidence of all their students. And coaching is particularly beneficial for struggling writers, guiding them along the road to academic success.

WriterCoach Connection program results are available here: [www.writercoachconnection.org/program-results.html](http://www.writercoachconnection.org/program-results.html)

Visit [writercoachconnection.org](http://writercoachconnection.org)

## Give a Meaningful Gift

The perfect gift for holidays, birthday or special occasions. Visit WCC's new online Gift Catalog ([www.writercoachconnection.org/gift-catalog](http://www.writercoachconnection.org/gift-catalog)) and choose from nine gifts that represent WCC's work with students, teachers and schools!

## Board Members Wanted

We are looking for new Board members, preferably with skills and experience that include fundraising and financial management. If good candidates come to mind, please contact board chair Kathy Kahn at [kathykahn@sbcglobal.net](mailto:kathykahn@sbcglobal.net).

## Donations and Planned Giving

Visit our Donate page to view our Gift Catalog and learn about making WCC part of your workplace giving or estate planning. A bequest to WCC may offer substantial tax advantages. [www.writercoachconnection.org/support.html](http://www.writercoachconnection.org/support.html)

## Socialize with Us

[Facebook.com/writercoachconnection](https://www.facebook.com/writercoachconnection)  
[Twitter: #writerconnect](https://twitter.com/writerconnect)  
 Blog: [wcc.typepad.com/writercoach\\_connection](http://wcc.typepad.com/writercoach_connection)

# Coaches Making Personal Statements with College Essay Support



WCC volunteers, like Tom Tramble, continue to help West County 11th and 12th graders craft their college essays at the Getting Ready for College Conference.

Among the terrors of the college testing and application process, the most daunting for most students, we've read recently, is not English or math, but the Personal Statement. The dreaded essay. That collection of words that's supposed to tell an admissions officer you've never met all about you. And, most importantly, all about why you and her school are a perfect fit. What do you say? And, maybe even more difficult to figure out, what do you not say?

College-hopeful high school juniors and seniors all around us try to wrestle that essay to the ground every year. In recent years, it began to dawn on counselors and teachers where we coach, and on some of our education collaboration partners, that our writer coaches were working in class on students' English writing assignments. On their essays. Hello!

Light bulbs seemed to go on everywhere. The Ed Fund's West County College Access Network asked if we'd provide coaches to help students with their college application essays at the annual Getting Ready for College Conference (GRFCC). The answer was yes, and three years ago, more than 30 WCC volunteers sat on a Saturday morning with small groups of students who seemed a little stunned that someone was helping them. Many were English learners with parents who didn't speak English and could offer little assistance.

Most had not started an essay and surely had been at sea about what to do.

We've helped at every GRFCC since then, and the Personal Statement Workshops have grown to be among the most popular on the conference agenda.

Meantime, requests to help students with college-application essays have begun to spread. Counselors or teachers at El Cerrito High and Berkeley High asked, and writer coaches at both schools said yes, and dozens showed up to help. Some of our West County College Access Network partners who work with high school students have asked. Individual parents of students at schools where we don't even coach have asked.

As we're asked more and more to help students with college application essays, we'll face the question of whether we have enough generous coaches to meet the demand. So far, the answer has been yes, and there may well be some students who are in college today because of it. 🍷

## Bear Coaches Make Marks

WriterCoach Connection at Berkeley, comprised of more than 50 coaches who are Cal students, has had a busy and productive fall. Led by WCC student managers Maia Rosen-garten, Sabrina Werts and club

president Katie Fullerton, the students recruited dozens of new writer coaches. The group meets regularly to provide a forum for writer coaches on campus and build momentum for a student-run class to be offered spring semester, "Why We Volunteer: A Look Inside Public Education." The one-unit course is designed to give students volunteering for

WCC context and support for their service in local public schools.

In mid October, the Cal student coaches organized a panel of respected educators and community organizers on the topic, "Literacy & Volunteering: Can I Make a Difference?" at the Free Speech Movement Café on campus. Panelists were Pamela Harrison-Small, director,

Berkeley Alliance; Jill Coffey, director, Berkeley Schools Volunteers; Andrea Pritchett, teacher, Willard Middle School; and David Pearson, professor, UC Berkeley Graduate School Of Education.

For more information about WriterCoach Connection at Berkeley, visit [calwritercoach-connection.com](http://calwritercoach-connection.com) 🍷

# Madison's Avenue

## Richmond High English Teacher Gains Traction with WriterCoach Support

by Steven Cohen

It's been a circuitous route for new Richmond High School teacher Madison Schmalz, but she's well aware that writer coaches have her back.

After short stints at Mount Diablo Unified School District, Sylvan Middle School (Citrus Heights), Casa Roble Fundamental High School (Orangevale) and Elk Grove High School, last year Schmalz landed at El Cerrito High School, subbing for the entire second semester. And it wasn't a soft landing: She had a really rough freshman class.

"They hated writing, and had a difficult time turning in assignments, especially essays," she recalls. "Then came the writing coaches, and [site and volunteer coordinator] Lynda Frank, like knights on white horses.

"They worked with my class, and the whole atmosphere changed. Students started to buy into their essays, and actually TURN things in."

With the support of writer coaches, a lot of the students with behavior issues started to write about their feelings, instead of simply yelling about them. Some started putting words to paper. Sometimes it was a sentence; other times, a full paragraph; occasionally, just a brainstorm. For a



Schmalz, left, with site coordinator Karen Larson.

class full of students who literally refused to write their names on their papers, it showed significant progress.

Other successes followed. Schmalz assigned a mini-persuasive essay that challenged her freshman students to synthesize ideas from real life and *Animal Farm* by George Orwell. They were asked to pick a term — either equality, the role of

government or the theory of transference — and explain how that term was used in *Animal Farm* and real life, then elaborate on whether they thought the term was better used in the novel or in real life.

"I saw my students really develop their critical thinking and organization skills," she says. "Granted, it wasn't all perfect, but the coaches made a huge difference. Having the support of the coaches was an amazing, affirming and positive experience."

Schmalz, who teaches 9th and 10th grade English and Advanced English at Richmond High in the Law Academy, incorporates activities that her students are getting in their law elective class. For instance, freshmen in the forensic science class learned the theory of transference, so they had the opportunity to discuss how it could relate to *Animal Farm*.

A Bay Area native, Schmalz has settled in at Richmond High for the long haul, while her husband, Tyler, teaches math at Terra Linda High School, across the bay in San Rafael.

She says, "I am very excited to see how my students grow this year as writers and thinkers, with the help of the amazing writing coaches." 🍌



"Writer coaches in Richmond High English Language Development and Law and Engineering Academy classes have propelled our students, supported our teachers, strengthened our community and reinforced our efforts to create a college-going culture."

Julio Franco  
Richmond High School Principal

Richmond High School Principal Julio Franco, left, with West Contra Costa Unified School District Superintendent Bruce Harter, championed the expansion of WriterCoach Connection to Richmond High last year.

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