



WriterCoach Connection™

Fall 2008

A Program of Community Alliance for Learning

The left column view

By Robert Menzimer, Executive Director

Around here, preparations for the new school year begin even before the school doors close the previous spring for summer break. Program assessment guides the adjustments and improvements we make for the following year. The everlasting search for funding is in high gear. Coaching materials are reviewed and revised. Staffing needs are projected, strategic direction is affirmed. Summer break seems like a myth!

But as the new school year starts, we're all reminded what the hard work is for. It's for the students heading into classrooms at the Berkeley middle schools—King, Longfellow, and Willard—at Community Partnerships Academy at Berkeley High, at Albany Middle School and Albany High, and at Media Academy in Oakland (see story on this page). And it's for our hard-working teachers. This year, WriterCoach Connection is serving seven schools, more than 30 teachers, more than 65 classes, and more than 1,500 students.

About 325 volunteer coaches are making it happen, and we'd love you to be one of them. Check us out at www.writercoachconnection.org or call me at 510.528.5066. Register online for training and become a coach. Help us raise funds. Help with our website, and this newsletter. Become part of something extraordinary, and start an experience you'll never forget. ■

"I had a great experience as a writer coach. I loved it so much that I applied for a teacher credential program last week at Mills College."

---WCC coach Laura Smyrl, Sept. 2008



One-on-one attention is the key to WriterCoach Connection.

Can we help in Oakland? Yes we can!

The teachers have prepared their classrooms and their curriculum, the students have come through the front gate, the first class bells have echoed down the hallways, and in the middle of October, volunteers from WriterCoach Connection will begin streaming into a school in Oakland.

It's been a long time coming. WCC has been serving students in Berkeley and Albany since the year 2001, with a constant eye on additional nearby underserved school districts, and a dream to get there. Generous funding from The Y&H Soda Foundation laid the groundwork, Oakland became the district, and Media Academy, part of the Fremont Federation of high schools in the Fruitvale district, became the school. And now, with a financial commitment from the Media Academy budget, additional support from the Thomas J. Long Foundation and the Fleishhacker Foundation, anonymous support from another East Bay foundation, donations to Community Alliance for Learning from countless individuals, and the enthusiastic support of Media Academy principal Benjamin Schmookler and tenth-grade English teacher Sonja Totten-Harris, coach recruits are signing up at the WCC website, www.writercoachconnection.org, coach training sessions are under way, and the dream has become a reality.

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(Oakland, from Pg. 1)

Every tenth-grade student at Media Academy will sit down with a coach for eight to ten individual writing conferences throughout the school year, working on Ms. Totten-Harris's assignments, developing writing and critical thinking skills. And forty to fifty writing coaches will discover anew the difference that one-on-one attention from a caring adult can make in the lives of the students sitting next to them. ■

Benefit nights at Berkeley Rep create a buzz at WCC

by Kathy Kahn, Chairperson, Board of Directors

WriterCoach Connection is sponsoring three benefit nights at "Yellowjackets," the first play of Berkeley Rep's 2008-09 season. Directed by Tony Taccone and written by nationally known playwright, Berkeley native, and BHS alum Itamar Moses, the play takes place at – you guessed it – Berkeley High. "When the newspaper publishes an insensitive story," (says the program note for this world premiere), "students suddenly find themselves embroiled in a volatile controversy – and even their teachers seem unprepared to deal with the repercussions."

Following graduation from Berkeley High, Itamar Moses attended Yale and New York Universities and later taught playwriting at both schools. Just 30 years old, he's written popular plays such as *Bach at Leipzig*, *Celebrity Row*, *The Four of Us*, and *Outrage* that have been produced off Broadway and nationwide. Says *Newsday*, "Moses clearly has a playful mind, an adventurous breadth of curiosity, and a delightful appreciation of the tension between form and meaning."

How could we stay away? Thanks to Berkeley Rep's generosity, WCC is sponsoring three benefit nights at the play: Friday, September 19 and Friday, September 26 at 8 p.m., and Sunday, October 5 at 7 p.m. Order your tickets online (www.berkeleyrep.org/ticketing/account/login.aspx) and use our promotional code: 3789. WriterCoach Connection gets \$10, and you'll get what promises to be a great night of theater.

And please join the Community Alliance for Learning board and staff at a pre-theater reception on October 5, at the Roda Theater, 2015 Addison. (At press time, we think the reception will start at 5:30; check our website at www.writercoachconnection.org to be sure.) ■

WISH LIST! Can you help WCC with website or accounting expertise? Call 510.528.5066. DONATE! Go to www.writercoachconnection.org.



Attend Yellowjackets at Berkeley Rep on Sept. 19 or 26, or the evening of Oct. 5, and Berkeley Rep will donate \$10 of your ticket price to WriterCoach Connection. Order tickets online and use promotional code 3789. (See story at left.)

How are we doing?

by Teresa Barnett, Program Manager

The very heart of the writer-to-coach connection is that coaches listen. So it is only fitting that our overall program assessment includes a large measure of listening. To teachers. To students. To coaches. We listen to the comments and the evaluations of the effectiveness of coaching, and how to make it an even more productive and successful use of time.

This past school year's program assessment survey once again found overwhelming student, teacher, and coach satisfaction. Over 90 percent of students rated the coaching as helpful to some degree – an incredible rate of agreement among teenagers on just about anything! Students indicated the most helpful aspects of coaching were showing what's working in their writing, giving suggestions for organizing ideas, checking for understanding of assignment, and showing how to express ideas more clearly.

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(How are we doing?, from Pg. 2)

Teachers also gave high marks to the program, with overall ratings of 99% helpful to some degree on all aspects of the coaching process. A full 90% of teachers' responses on the combined effectiveness of the program indicated coaching was helpful to very helpful.

Teachers observed notable improvements when comparing coached vs. similar non-coached assignments, indicating the coached assignments resulted in higher quality of writing, rate of assignments turned in, and overall grades earned. Teachers indicated the most helpful elements of coaching included improving the structure and organization of student writing, and working with struggling students.

And the results are showing. Student scores on standardized testing in English language arts have been rising steadily, particularly in the Berkeley middle schools in which WCC has been working to support a vigorous focus on the writing curriculum.

And, coaches overwhelmingly rated WCC as a rewarding coaching experience, backed up by the high rate of returning coaches each year!

What we learned from the most recent program assessment is being transformed into actions, including enhanced training and support materials for coaches. The three interrelated elements that make for the ideal successful coaching experience involve teachers providing information regarding specific student learning needs and specific lesson and coaching goals, site coordinators who use that information to prepare the coaches in advance, and coaches who provide specific action steps that address the expressed goals of the coaching session.

We will continue to partner with our schools to support their efforts in developing strong, effective writing curriculum and instruction practices. ■

WriterCoach Connection™ is a program of:

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Send tax deductible donations payable to CAFL to the address above.

Covering all the bases

She hasn't been president of the United States. But, within Community Alliance for Learning, there's a strong feeling that she might as well try, since she seems to have done just about everything else.



“One-on-one interaction with students is amazingly productive.”

—King Middle School Site Coordinator Kathleen Hallam

Kathleen Hallam has been with WriterCoach Connection since the beginning, when she served as a coach at Berkeley High in 2001 and then became the program's site coordinator at Willard Middle School. Before long, she was overseeing the program for every eighth-grade student in the district, at all three middle schools. Then it was over the border to Albany last year, where she was the site co-coordinator for the second year of the program at the middle school. And this year, it's back to Berkeley, where she will coordinate the program at King Middle School. On top of all that, Kathleen is one of the program's most experienced coach trainers, helped develop the training manual, and is a CAFL director, serving as the board secretary.

Kathleen brings a broad background in education to CAFL, with a Master's in English from San Jose State University; experience as a college instructor and lecturer in composition, literature, and creative writing; and extensive practical work in technical writing, copy editing, and free-lance editing. "I always enjoy teaching a class," she says, "but I feel much more effective as a coach. One-on-one interaction with students is amazingly productive."

For any number of activities, Kathleen is the go-to person at WCC. If CAFL were ever to rent an airplane, she'd probably be the pilot. ■

Donating to WCC is easy, and deeply appreciated! Just click on 'DONATE NOW' at www.writercoachconnection.org.

CAFL launches diversity initiative

By Lynn Mueller, Associate Director

“It’s important for students in diverse classrooms to have some teachers and mentors who look like them,” says Community Alliance For Learning board member and retired engineer Edmund Bussey, who is African American.

“A student’s background and culture can affect how she reads and interprets the materials being discussed in her classes,” agrees WCC coach Barbara Goto.

In May 2008, CAFL formalized a commitment to increasing diversity within the organization and among its volunteers. At a focus group, WCC coaches discussed ways to identify barriers, to increase outreach to diverse groups, and to diversify the staff. The meeting prompted an outpouring of suggestions from WCC coaches and a renewed effort to broaden outreach.

The public classrooms where WCC coaches work with students are ethnically, economically and culturally diverse. According to the 2006-07 School Accountability Report Cards for BUSD, over 70% of students in the district identify themselves as of ethnicities other than “white,” and over 40% of students qualify for free or reduced price meals. At specific schools the numbers are higher, including our new Oakland high school, Media Academy, where approximately 50% of students identify as Latino and 30% as African American.

For the past several years, CAFL has focused on sensitivity to issues of diversity and increased efforts to recruit volunteers of color, in 2007 adding to coach training suggestions for building trust when there are cultural differences between coach and student. CAFL has also increased recruitment efforts at UC Berkeley, targeting student organizations and departments related to cultural groups such as La Raza Student Association and the African American Studies department. In spring 2008, CAFL consulted with the diversity specialist at Lawrence Livermore Labs, who offered to serve as a liaison for WCC to organizations such as NAACP, The Level Playing Field Institute, and others. Elsewhere, WCC coaches are helping us contact cultural organizations such as La Clinica de la Raza, the East Bay Asian Youth Center, Women of Color Resource Center, and churches and temples with predominantly African American, Asian, or Hispanic congregations. Meantime, CAFL is attending neighborhood community meetings in diverse neighborhoods.

In Oakland, Media Academy principal Benjamin Schmookler applauds anybody who gives time to students in the public schools. CAFL is also deeply grateful for all its volunteers and continues to strive to be inclusive. Chairperson Kathleen Kahn adds, “These are your schools, too; please join us and contribute your experience and knowledge to help students in the classroom.” Suggestions for helping CAFL’s diversity efforts are always welcome at writercoachconnect@yahoo.com. ■

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Community Alliance for Learning

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