El Cerrito teacher and coach says: WCC scores!

by Kathy Kahn

As quoted in an article in the Contra Costa Times, El Cerrito teacher Kenny Kahn, really sees the impact of WCC in his classrooms. The program “...really pushes the kids along,” he says in the Times article. “It empowers the students. They have confidence to speak in class. They’re learning to craft arguments in their writing.” He calls the support he’s received as a teacher “...a blessing. They give the one-on-one attention that I alone cannot give. I can’t stretch myself 35 ways in a 90-minute period. To have the coaches come in, it’s like having 35 teachers here.”

The amazing Mr. Kahn – English teacher and football coach at El Cerrito High – isn’t at all amazed, himself, at his unusual combination of teaching duties. One of his mentors during his student years at ECHS was his football coach. Then, at UC Santa Cruz, he discovered literature and creative writing. Now that he’s back at ECHS as an English teacher, he says, “About thirty percent of my football players are students of mine whom I’ve urged to come out for the team.”

In both sports and academics, he says, “you have to take the kids through the steps. They have to know the standards, and how to meet them... Well, OK, maybe I’ve been watching ‘Friday Night Lights’ too much.”

In other words, Kenny is a born teacher, no matter what the subject. “As a teacher, you have to be a performer every day,” he says. “You have to explain things in a way that immediately makes sense to the kids, but that still provokes them to think. You have to show them how to be vulnerable, but also find a way to improve themselves.”

Besides regular English classes and creative writing, Kenny teaches English learners, the group that WCC coached in its pilot year at El Cerrito High. “I need to help these kids learn the elements of writing, because it’s the main test we use to switch them to the mainstream,” he says. “Some of these kids have been taking ELD for years, and they begin to feel, ‘What’s the use?’ And writing is hard for them to learn. You guys – WriterCoach Connection – helped them get through the difficult areas, with your welcoming approach.”

“Hey – it takes a village!”

“WriterCoach Connection has proven to be highly effective in generating increased writing achievement in Oakland classrooms. More Oakland schools are requesting WriterCoach Connection as word gets out about the results it produces. We need this program, and these volunteers, now more than ever.”

Tony Smith, Superintendent, Oakland Unified School District
A w a r d  w i n n e r s :  G l o r i a  “ J a c k ”  ( l . )  a n d  t w i n  s i s t e r  K i m  M e j i a - C u e l l .

...at http://www.writercoachconnection.org/program-results.html.

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Development (ELD) classes we served last year. With school funding and community donations, we’ve taken a significant leap at ECHS this year, adding all 320 9th graders to the program. With the school’s ELD students scheduled for writer coaching again this year, the total of more than 400 students guided by our coaches will make WCC at El Cerrito High the largest program among our sites.

And there’s still more to come for 2011-12. With staff and community members at Portola Middle School in El Cerrito and at Oakland School for the Arts, we are planning spring pilot programs at both schools.

When we expanded at three sites last year, we never dreamed we might hit that number of new sites again for 2011-12. But the dream is a reality and in classrooms at even more East Bay schools, grateful teachers are beaming and coach-student conversations are buzzing in the air.

Data shows: WCC means better student writing
by Robert Menzimer

“I’ve always loved writing and it is great to share my ideas with someone who loves it just as much as I do. In the end I think it makes my writing better.” That testimony from a student last year reflects the 2010-11 WCC Assessment Report. A robust 94% of the students we served found our coaching helpful, according to our annual survey of program stakeholders. Moreover, every one of the 29 teachers we supported pronounced the program “helpful” to “very helpful” in raising student writing achievement.

In Oakland, 10th-grade Media Academy students achieved impressive gains on the English Language Arts (ELA) section of the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE), which students must pass to graduate. A solid 70% of the sophomores passed the ELA test on their first try. The principal at Media Academy described this success on CAHSEE as unprecedented at the school.

Students served by WCC also did well on the CAHSEE at Media’s sister school, Mandela High, where 60.3% passed the ELA section on their first try. As a further measure of writing proficiency, Mandela students coached by WCC also wrote on-demand essays at the beginning and end of the school year, with the essays scored by trained readers using the four-point CAHSEE rubric. Overall, writing proficiency rose from 12.5% in September to 31.25% in June.

At El Cerrito High School, WCC made a striking impact on the English learners we served: 63% of them passed the English Language Arts section of the CAHSEE — a startling improvement over the previous year’s pass rate of 35% for English learners and the District pass rate of 37%. One teacher remarked, “WCC had an immense impact on student work, writing craft, and quality of work.” Another noted “tremendous growth class-wide.” Although we readily acknowledge that WCC can claim only a supporting role in strengthening students’ writing, one teacher credits WCC with inspiring him to increase substantially the number of essays he assigned, and he feels the additional student writing undoubtedly helped to produce this heartening result.

The comments of these teachers clearly indicate there’s more to our coaching than data. Noted a Berkeley High teacher on the 2010-11 survey, “WCC has been a real benefit to my students beyond helping them with their writing. The experience of interacting with an adult they don’t know has helped them with that skill.” One student who seems to agree noted, “I think every school should use this method.”

But the most telling feedback may have come from the student who said, “I hate writing but my coach makes me like what I write & want to work on it.”