Helping guide WriterCoach Connection

By Kathleen Kahn, Chair, Community Alliance for Learning

It’s an exciting time to be part of the leadership of WriterCoach Connection. Our growth may be happening in fits and starts – but it is clearly happening, in spite of the worst economic conditions most of us can remember. We’re talking to parents’ and teachers’ groups about licensing our program to schools which are beyond our geographic reach. We’re doing all this with a staff of two point three people, all of them working triple time.

As WriterCoach Connection grows, its board of directors needs to grow as well. Right now, there are ten of us – we’re mostly from Berkeley and Albany, though two of us are from Oakland and we’ve got a couple of out-of-towners as well. But as we bring our program to more Oakland schools and to El Cerrito and (we hope) beyond in Contra Costa, we’d like to have more board members with ties to those school districts.

We can use all kinds of help. If you have legal, managerial, or educational expertise, we’d love to talk to you about board membership. If you simply have time and energy to pitch in with fundraising events or mailing parties, we’d really love to talk to you! Monthly Board meetings are lively and fun – and offer new ways to bring your creativity and skills to WriterCoach Connection.

If you’re interested, contact me at kathykahn@sbcglobal.net. Contact me even if you think you might be interested. We often have guests at board meetings and you’ll be welcomed. If you’re interested, contact me at kathykahn@sbcglobal.net. Contact me even if you think you might be interested. We often have guests at board meetings and you’ll be welcome to come meet us.

WriterCoach Connection

P.O. Box 6098
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The left column view

Read all about it, in the story to the right: WriterCoach Connection is expanding in a big way for 2010-11. We’re able to serve more schools with WCC because teachers want it, students respond to it, volunteers are eager to work in it, and funders are willing to support it. And all of that is true for one big reason: the program effectively supports writing achievement.

(See assessment story on Pg. 2).

Those funders I mentioned include individual donors, literally hundreds of them. Maybe you’re one of them, or will be soon. Help keep us going, and growing! Donating online is simple and fast—just hit the Donate tab on our website at http://www.writercoachconnection.org/donate.html. Or send a check, payable to CAFL, to PO Box 6098, Albany, CA 94706.

And speaking of our website, it’s got a fresh new look, with a streamlined layout, updated information, and lots of action photos. Fire up that link and see what all the excitement is about!

Bob
Robert Menzimer
Executive Director
Community Alliance for Learning

More students, more schools
WCC GROWS AGAIN

by Robert Menzimer

WriterCoach Connection is a blur of motion as the 2010-11 school year explodes out of the starting blocks, with writer coaches sprinting (well, okay, walking eagerly, if decorously) back into classrooms at Media Academy in Oakland; King, Longfellow, and Willard middle schools in Berkeley; Community Partnerships Academy at Berkeley High; and Albany Middle School.

And there’s a special reason for all the excitement as we begin our 11th (!) year: we’re breaking all records for program expansion. With the program returning for a third straight year to Media Academy in Oakland’s Fruitvale District, coaches will also be entering Mandela’s sister school on the Fremont Federated campus, Mandela High, working with all of Mandela’s tenth graders in a fall pilot program that we hope will expand to the rest of the school year, pending sufficient funding. Meantime, WCC is getting bigger at its birthplace, Berkeley High, with coaching for all students in the tenth grade English classes at the Communications Arts & Sciences small school. And there’s more! A dedicated group of El Cerrito citizens has worked tirelessly to bring WCC across the border for the first time to the West Contra Costa school district, and their persistence is paying off this fall with a pilot program at El Cerrito High School.

More writing support for more students in more schools—that’s our continuing goal, and this year we’re taking three giant strides to get there.

In photo above: Oakland program coordinator Karen Larson works with a student at Oakland’s Media Academy. This year Karen and her coaches will spread their writing support to Media’s sister school in the Fremont Federation, Mandela High.


Don’t stereotype me
By Karen Larson, WCC site coordinator, Oakland

I’m tall doesn’t mean I play basketball.
I’m Asian doesn’t mean I’m good at math.
I’m black doesn’t mean I know how to rap.
I’m a teenager doesn’t mean I’m going to shoplift in your store.

Eighth-grade students at Albany Middle School face an interesting challenge early in the school year: write a poem about being stereotyped. But not general, hypothetical situations involving stereotyping: the examples have to be personal. Not surprisingly, as the above quotes demonstrate, these teens have already run into bias in their daily lives.

One of my favorite things about writer coaching is the opportunity to challenge my own biases when I coach. Many coaches have a story about when a coaching conference didn’t turn out the way they thought it would. Mine involves a tall, eighth-grade boy with a cap pulled low over his eyes, hiding in his black hoodie emblazoned with gold dollar signs. I made my judgments. Within minutes he disproved all my preconceptions, and I discovered he wrote poetry like an angel.

Coaching forces me to be more conscious of my biases and face them head on. I’ve learned that the one-on-one writing conference is a powerful dynamic for breaking down stereotypes. As we work together side by side, focused intently on writing and a common goal, we become simply two individuals—and differences in age, race or appearance seem to vanish.

Students may have their own stereotypes about the adults coming into the classroom. Imagine their surprise—and pleasure—at discovering that their coach is funny, personable, and engaged with them. It’s wonderful to observe. At Oakland’s Academy Media, Principal Benjamin Schmookler says that a significant benefit of WCC is the opportunity it offers his students and the volunteer coaches to cross some cultural boundaries and enrich each other’s lives.

Emily Pronin, an associate professor of psychology at Princeton University, writes in the Princeton Alumni Weekly, 7/7/10:

... that while people tend to underestimate their own biases, they overestimate the biases of others, particularly when the other person belongs to a less favored group. This occurs because we tend to focus on our own private motives, rather than our actions, while judging others by their actions [or appearances] rather than their motives.

Connections happen between people when they are forced to drop their preconceived ideas and look at each other as individuals. WriterCoach Connection gives us all the opportunity to do just that.

Just because I’m old enough to be your parent doesn’t mean that we can’t form a connection.

What goes around, comes around

Stick around long enough, and you’ll see some pretty amazing things. When we hit our tenth year of writer coaching in East Bay schools in 2009-10, at first it didn’t occur to us that, at some point, students who were served by WriterCoach volunteering as the program began at King, and she’s been there ever since. "She has wonderful stories about coaching," Steve says. "And since she started with the program, she has become an amazingly good proofreader for any of my writing."

All teachers reported that the writer coaches were “very helpful” or “helpful.” Twelve of the 15 specific program elements in the survey were judged particularly effective, including improving the structure and organization of writing, improving the clarity of thesis statements and topic sentences, making effective revisions, and increasing the number of assignments turned in. Teachers also reported that coaching increases students’ confidence about writing, increases students’ motivation, and is helpful to students at all levels of ability.

In Oakland, WCC coaches worked with Media Academy tenth-grade students in preparation for the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). Subsequently, a startling 79% of those students passed the English Language Arts section of the exam on the first attempt, and 33% of the students scored 380 (the threshold for proficiency) or above on the essay portion of the exam. The Media principal regarded these results as unprecedented for his school.

Stories or data—any way you look at it, WCC works!