When something good happens, it often spreads. That’s what happened when the West Contra Costa school district noticed the success of WCC at El Cerrito High School in 2010–11. “Now I want you at Richmond High (RHS),” Superintendent Bruce Harter told us one wintry morning in December 2011. “Can you be there in January?”

Well, no, not in only a month. But we thought we could be up at RHS in September. And we were. Meantime, City of Richmond Chief Service Officer Rochelle Monk sat up and started thinking about the national Cities of Service Grant program that supported the use of community volunteers. A perfect example, WriterCoach Connection, was sitting right in front of her. A year later, Ms. Monk had led the partnership with us that ultimately brought WCC to Kennedy High this fall and expanded the program at Richmond High.

That’s why the number of students coached at Richmond High has jumped to 210. And it’s why site coordinator Karen Larson says, “Coaches are sending emails saying, ‘It is great to be back!’”

Cities of Service, City of Richmond, school district and community support are also why every couple of weeks this school year at Kennedy High, two English classes will be buzzing with action: every one of the 74 students has a personal writer coach.

“Students get so much writing done!” says site coordinator Kathleen Hallam. “The coaches are impressed with the students, and I am impressed with both.”

Writer coaches in Richmond classrooms where none existed before: that’s impressive!
Teachers agree that WCC significantly improves student writing, and a new assessment initiative in 2013–14 showed how and why. Berkeley High School made a major commitment to writing assessment and ultimately provided the hard numbers about student writing proficiency that we’re always looking for.

In fall 2013, the 813 students we coached when they were eighth graders in Berkeley’s three middle schools wrote their first scored essays as Berkeley High ninth graders, side by side with the nearly 40 percent of their peers who entered BHS from private schools. The writing assessment scores of students coached by WCC in the Berkeley public middle schools came within a whisker of those educated in expensive private schools — 39 percent vs. 39.7 percent “mastery.”

In another measurement of writing proficiency, all BHS ninth and tenth graders wrote four scored argument essays during the 2013–14 school year. Students in the classes we coached showed admirable progress from early fall to late spring:

- Communication Arts & Sciences (CAS) ninth graders went from 17.5 to 37.5 percent mastery.
- Academy of Medicine and Public Service (AMPS) ninth graders went from 25.5 to 40.4 percent mastery.
- AMPS tenth graders went from 26.2 to 35.7 percent mastery.

These results suggest that WCC coaching augments teachers’ effectiveness, producing impressive gains in student writing skills.

For more results, including survey data for each school site and extensive comments from teachers, coaches and students, see www.writercoachconnection.org/program-results

This survey data clearly delineates the positive impact of WCC on student writing, as attested by those who know the students best, their teachers.

Coaches and students also expressed a big thumbs-up for WCC. More than 90 percent of coaches agreed that their coaching time was productive and that their experience with the program was rewarding. Among students, 95 percent regarded our writing support as beneficial overall, with 46 percent giving it the highest rating, “very helpful.”
A few years back Aryn Faur was exploring unsolved mysteries with her seventh graders: Do psychic powers exist? What happened at Stonehenge? Was there really a Loch Ness Monster? Nothing mysterious about Faur’s approach: She wanted her students to be able to ascertain whether information from a website or another source was credible (or not), and build an argument.

Faur (sounds like “flower”) is still pushing students to dig deeper for evidence, whether it’s in her role as literacy coach for Berkeley’s three middle schools, English teacher at Longfellow Middle School or informal adviser to WCC coaches.

“Elaborate thinking, and critical thinking, and building an argument, and testing that argument in conversation is something that often only happens in dialogue with another person,” says Faur, who has taught for 15 years. “Rarely do teachers get to have that one-on-one dialogue with students.”

The real value of WriterCoach Connection, she contends, is less about coaches zeroing in on writing mechanics and more about engaging their students in deeper conversations to develop their content.

“What’s transformative about writer coaches is that they force students to question their thinking, to elaborate their thinking and to test the generalizations that are embedded in their writing.”

It’s a role that will grow with implementation of the Common Core Standards (CCS), which place more emphasis on close reading of more challenging informational text (both fiction and non-fiction) and building arguments.

As a district literacy coach, Faur is leading the rollout of CCS English Language Arts for Berkeley’s middle schools. She also helped update the Common Core section of the WriterCoach Connection training manual, and discussed what impact those standards could have on the writing curriculum at a WCC meeting in March. (See the video here: www.writercoachconnection.org/coaching-resources)

“One of the things that Common Core is saying is that you can’t separate writing from thinking from reading,” says Faur. “So careful reading of text before you get to that point is really key.”

If Faur’s seventh graders were grappling with unsolved mysteries a few years ago, today you might find them immersed in Socratic seminars—student-centered conversations that are taking place in Berkeley middle school classrooms. On the day we met, Faur had just done a Socratic seminar with her eighth grade English class about the symbolism in a short memoir, entitled “The Horned Toad.”

As in other Socratic seminars, students were given the text and taught to do a close reading by annotating that text using academic language frames. Then they brought their questions, annotations, comments and answers to engage in a dialogue with other students.

“Getting our heads around what close reading can look like is exciting,” says Faur. “It’s a great opportunity for a juicy dialogue between students and coaches.”
Experienced Coaches Help Struggling Writers at Berkeley High School

In June 2014, Berkeley High (BHS) literacy coach Tamara Friedman approached WriterCoach Connection with a challenge. She asked us to provide BHS’s lowest-scoring writers with the same quality and intensity of writing support that affluent parents can buy for their children. We jumped at the opportunity to help.

By September Friedman had secured funding from the BHS Development Group, the Berkeley Public Schools Fund and the Berkeley Unified School District. The Berkeley Writing Intervention project launched in October.

This special project offers 10 weekly hour-long sessions of highly focused one-on-one writing support each semester. The goal is to help these struggling students pass the writing section of the California High School Exit Examination and to improve their scores on BHS’s own writing assessments.

Project manager Kim Gonzales and WCC associate director Lynn Mueller recruited 20 highly experienced coaches to volunteer for this intervention, to serve students enrolled in Berkeley High’s academic support or academic language development classes.

“These coaches are extraordinary,” Gonzales observed. “They have to be extremely flexible because every week is different, and students often want or need to switch gears quite suddenly. They have acclimated to the model beautifully and are putting their heart and soul into working with these kids.”

Noted Writer Coach Connection Executive Director Robert Menzimer, “We are still in the early stages of an experimental pilot program, but we hope it levels the playing field for a group of students who really need some help.”

New Coach Survey Shows We’re an Impressive Bunch

WriterCoach Connection sent 678 trained coaches into 80 East Bay classrooms last year. But who were these volunteers? What experience and expertise did they bring to the students they coached? Last spring board member Janet Kodish created an online survey designed to answer these questions and more.

More than half the coaches (384) responded, and the results are impressive. For example, of the respondents:

- 66 percent have teaching experience of some kind (20 percent are credentialed K–12 teachers); 37 percent have taught in higher education
- 75 percent have worked with youth
- 36 percent are published writers
- 44 percent earned master’s degrees; 15 percent, professional degrees; and 12 percent, doctoral degrees

And, it’s safe to say, 100 percent were dedicated to helping students learn to write effectively and think clearly!

Find out more about our coaches by viewing the results here: http://www.writercoachconnection.org/our-coaches.html