FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
September 29, 2014  
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Writing Coaches Go Back to School as Community Program Expands in East Bay

RICHMOND — Approximately 2,500 students at 11 East Bay public secondary schools will be getting a writing boost starting this week thanks to an innovative program fueled by local volunteers.

More than 675 trained volunteer coaches from WriterCoach Connection (WCC) will return to middle and high school classrooms in Albany, Berkeley, El Cerrito, Oakland and Richmond to collaborate with teachers and work one-on-one with students, in class, on their writing assignments.

The volunteers — parents, lawyers, university students, retired educators, writers and other working or retired professionals — receive six hours of free training to become writing coaches. They offer students tips and suggestions on their writing assignments to help them gain competence and confidence in their writing and critical thinking skills, empower their self-expression and prepare them for success.

Teachers love the individual attention coaches give to students that they can’t provide on their own, especially in an era of overcrowded classrooms and tight school budgets. And the volunteer coaches form deep bonds with their local public schools.

“The demand for our services is there because of the rewards for students, teachers, coaches and communities,” says Robert Menzimer, WCC’s executive director.

“Everyone wins, and we need more of it,” says West Contra Costa Unified School District Superintendent Bruce Harter.

Harter’s Richmond schools WILL be getting more coaching support this year. WriterCoach Connection expands to John F. Kennedy High School, through an ongoing partnership with the City of Richmond, which has attracted funding from the Cities of Service program for “impact volunteering” strategies that tackle pressing local

Writing proficiency increased dramatically in Richmond High’s 10th grade Engineering and Law Academy classes where writer coaches volunteered last year.

“They [writing coaches] worked with my class, and the whole atmosphere changed,” said Madison Schmalz, who teaches 9th and 10th grade English and Advanced English at Richmond High’s Law Academy. “Students started to buy into their essays, and actually turn things in. I saw my students really develop their critical thinking and organization skills. I am very excited to see how my students grow [with writing coaches support] this year.”

In program-wide assessments, every teacher attested to the effectiveness of WCC, with more than 90 percent of teachers responding that WriterCoach Connection helped to improve the overall quality of student writing, fostered more positive attitudes toward writing, and raised grades on coached assignments. Ninety-four percent of students agreed that coaching was helpful.

“It was such a pleasant experience to compare the grades last semester with writing coaches, to the previous one without them,” says Curt Douglas, Chair of the English Department at nearby El Cerrito High School. “The grades went up 10 percent or one full grade level.”

English Language Development classes have also benefitted from writing coaches. During the 2012–13 school year at Richmond High, the rate of students passing out of the ELD program into mainstream classes after receiving writer coaching was 48 percent; the usual figures are roughly estimated at between 25 to 35 percent.

Intensive writing intervention is the focus of a new program that will pilot this fall at Berkeley High School, where the WCC began 15 years ago. Twenty experienced coaches will work one-on-one with 20 Berkeley High students who are especially challenged with English language arts for a full 50 minutes every week for 10 weeks.

“We’ll continue with program expansion as long as our volunteer ranks and funding support growth,” says Menzimer.

Since 2001, WriterCoach Connection has served more than 25,000 middle and high school students in 11 East Bay schools in Albany, Berkeley, El Cerrito, Oakland and Richmond, making it the largest continuing Bay Area program dedicated to school writing support. For additional information about WriterCoach Connection, visit the organization’s website at www.writercoachconnection.org

**WriterCoach Connection schools 2014**

Albany
Albany Middle School

Berkeley
Berkeley High School (Academy of Medicine and Public Service, Arts and Humanities Academy, Green Academy)
King Middle School
Longfellow Middle School
Willard Middle School

El Cerrito
El Cerrito High School
Fred T. Korematsu Middle School

Oakland
Fremont High School
Life Academy High School

Richmond
Richmond High School
John F. Kennedy High School

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