



## Writing Instruction in Massachusetts

by Alison L. Fraser

### Foreword

This new Pioneer Institute policy brief on student writing in our schools will be helpful if it highlights the understanding that students will need to write often and at length in college and beyond. Personal and creative writing alone do not prepare students for college term papers or for the memoranda and reports they may need to write at work. With the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test of writing showing 55 percent of Massachusetts' eighth graders scoring "needs improvement" or below, it ought to be clear that, despite any progress our schools have made in writing under education reform, many schools still have a long way to go.



A Harvard College student who attended a public high school in California wrote:

"I had never written more than five paragraphs for any essay or paper in my entire academic career prior to entering university. Not one. . .It took me two years [at Harvard] to gain a working knowledge of paper writing, to get to a point where I was constructing arguments and using evidence to support them. I read pamphlets and books on the mechanics of writing college papers, but the reality is simple: you only learn how to write papers by writing them."

Since 1987, I have published more than 800 history research papers by high school students from around the world. Every student I have heard from after they got to college told me that they were among the very few of their peers who were prepared for college writing assignments. These students also noted that many of their friends came to them for help writing papers.

We must give Massachusetts' students the practice they need in academic writing—just as we give them practice in algebra, geometry, and science—to help them prepare for their work in and after higher education. As Alison Fraser explains, the failure to do this has cost our economy and many of our students very dearly in recent years.

Will Fitzhugh, *The Concord Review*

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**Alison L. Fraser** is an education policy, research and strategy consultant, and president of Practical Policy. She was previously the Director of Policy and Advocacy at Mass Insight Education, where she directed the Great Schools Campaign and the development of *No Excuses for Failing Schools* and *Excellence in Math and Science* goals. An expert in standards-based curriculum, she has coordinated activities and programs for the Coalition for Higher Standards and has led research in standards-based reform.

### Introduction

A Gates Foundation-commissioned report entitled *Diploma to Nowhere* summarizes the problem with many K-12 writing programs:

“The public believes that a high school diploma shows that a student is ready for college-level academics. Parents believe it too. So do students.

But when high school graduates enroll in college, as many as one million students fail placement exams every year. Well over one third of all college students need remedial courses in order to acquire basic academic skills...A high school diploma no longer demonstrates that a graduate is ready for college.

Students’ inadequate preparation for higher education has become a deep and widespread problem. Some of the nation’s most selective universities—like the University of Wisconsin, Madison—now test all incoming students in order to determine who needs extra academic help. Ivy League universities like Dartmouth College offer *year-long remedial* courses in writing.”<sup>1</sup>

Massachusetts has shown tremendous progress on any number of assessments of its students’ English Language Arts and Mathematics achievement since the passage of the landmark Education Reform Act of 1993. But how the is the Bay State doing on writing? Despite 17 years of education reform and first-in-the-nation performance on standardized tests, too many Massachusetts high school graduates are still not prepared for work or post-secondary education. In May 2008, recognizing this reality, the then-Chairman of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) commissioned a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills Task Force to develop recommendations for new standards and assessments that would fill the gap with regard to skills missing from state frameworks, including effective oral and written communication skills.

Clearly, if students cannot convey their ideas cogently and coherently in writing, then proficiency with

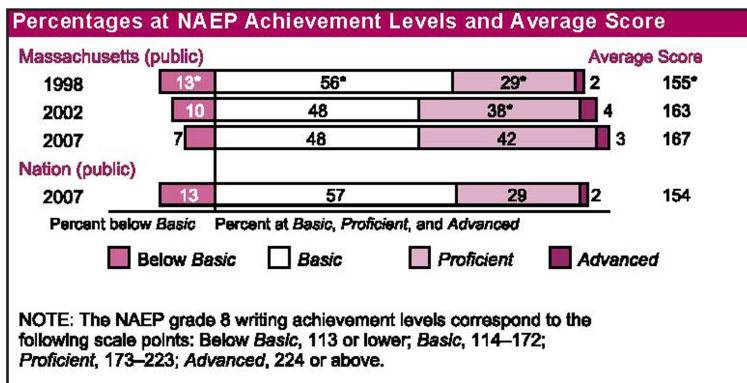
any skill set will be for naught. In our increasingly “paperless” society, which is also more text-rich than ever before, good writing is central to academic and professional success. According to a report on a 2004 survey of 120 major American businesses affiliated with the Business Roundtable, “fixing [workers’] writing deficiencies on the job costs American corporations as much as \$3.1 billion annually.” The National Writing Commission’s report on the survey, *Writing: A Ticket to Work...Or a Ticket Out*, concluded that in the modern world, writing is a “threshold skill” for both hiring and promotion.<sup>2</sup>

If the failure to learn to write well is pervasive in Massachusetts, then it stands to reason that we should first look to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) assessments designed to measure mastery of those frameworks. An independent analysis completed in December 2009 by a member of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education found that almost all of the authentic skills that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills Task Force identified as important, such as effective written communication, are already embedded in the state’s academic standards and guiding principles (see Sidebar on page 3).

If the skills that students need to be successful writers are present in the frameworks, then there must be another reason for the poor performance of so many Massachusetts students. Recent studies suggest that the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks are not being taught effectively in many classrooms.<sup>3</sup> If this is the case, and indeed it appears to be, then any recommended revisions to the frameworks should be weighed carefully. It makes little sense to take the time and energy to change the state’s nationally recognized frameworks if teachers do not understand them or are unable or unwilling to use them in the classroom. Indeed, policy makers must first understand why the state’s writing frameworks are not being properly addressed in so many classrooms if they are going to make an informed decision about how to improve the quality of writing instruction that students receive.

This policy brief analyzes how students in Massachusetts perform on writing assessments and the relationship of that performance to state curriculum frameworks and the MCAS examination. To that end, it explores improvements in writing test scores over time while also highlighting data that show that too many Massachusetts students continue to be unable to communicate effectively in writing. This work goes on to argue that the inability of Massachusetts' students to communicate effectively in writing is in part due to ineffective methods for teaching writing that pervade middle and high school classrooms statewide. It concludes with recommendations for improving not only teaching strategies but also the supports that schools have for understanding and properly implementing the Massachusetts English language arts (ELA) curriculum frameworks.

## Massachusetts Students' Performance on National Writing Exam



Source: NAEP 2007 Writing State Snapshot Report, Massachusetts Grade 8.

Relative to their peers across the country, Massachusetts' students are doing well, making great strides in writing since Education Reform was passed in 1993. On the NAEP reading and mathematics sections, the Commonwealth's students lead the nation. In writing, they place third behind Connecticut and New Jersey. This translates to 45 percent of eighth graders writing at or above the 'Proficient' level on the 2007 administration of the test—a significant increase from the 31 percent who scored at or above 'Proficient' in 1998.

### The nationally acclaimed writing standards currently in the Massachusetts frameworks:

- Students will write with a clear focus, coherent organization, and sufficient detail
- Students will write for different audiences and purposes
- Students will demonstrate improvement in organization, content, paragraph development, level of detail, style, tone, and word choice (diction) in their compositions after revising them
- Students will use knowledge of standard English conventions in their writing, revising, and editing
- Students will organize ideas in writing in a way that makes sense for their purpose
- Students will gather information from a variety of sources, analyze and evaluate the quality of the information they obtain, and use it to answer their own questions
- Students will develop and use appropriate rhetorical, logical, and stylistic criteria for assessing final versions of their compositions or research projects before presenting them to varied audiences

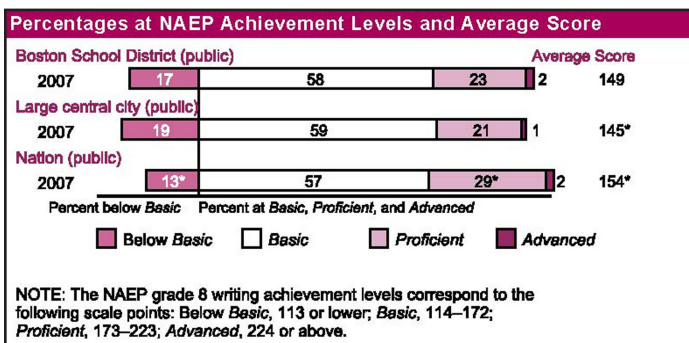
### Language and Media Standards in the Massachusetts frameworks:

- Students will use agreed-upon rules for informal and formal discussions in small and large groups
- Students will pose questions, listen to the ideas of others, and contribute their own information or ideas in group discussions or interviews in order to acquire new knowledge
- Students will make oral presentations that demonstrate appropriate consideration of audience, purpose, and the information to be conveyed
- Students will understand and acquire new vocabulary and use it correctly in reading and writing
- Students will analyze standard English grammar and usage and recognize how its vocabulary has developed and been influenced by other languages
- Students will describe, analyze, and use appropriate formal and informal English
- Students will design and create coherent media productions (audio, video, television, multimedia, Internet, emerging technologies) with a clear controlling idea, adequate detail, and appropriate consideration of audience, purpose, and medium

This fourteen-point improvement in writing proficiency over time suggests that the state's composition standards and assessments have been effective tools for improving writing for many students. The fact that the Bay State's assessments are not purely multiple-choice (as in many other states), and that the answers to half of the test items must be in the form of short essays or a long composition, has made teachers and students more accountable for writing skills. The effects of this accountability are demonstrated by the state's top national ranking.

Based on the work and consensus of experts and professional educators, Massachusetts has, since 1997, published and updated detailed state standards for writing that, when used as a basis for a writing curriculum, should result in student writing that is clear, focused, grammatically correct, and therefore easily deciphered by readers. According to a guiding principle of the English language arts (ELA) curriculum framework, "an effective English language arts curriculum emphasizes writing as an essential way to develop, clarify, and communicate ideas in persuasive, expository, narrative, and expressive discourse." Another guiding principle states, "An effective ELA curriculum provides explicit skill instruction in reading and writing."<sup>4</sup> Properly addressing these standards and guiding principles may help prepare graduating students for college, career and life success.

Nevertheless, 55 percent of students are still not communicating effectively using the written word. In Boston, for example, just 25 percent of 8th grade



Source: NAEP 2007 Writing Trial Urban District Snapshot Report, Boston School District Grade 8.

**Letter from Laura Arandes**

A 2005 graduate of Harvard University, Ms. Arandes comments on how her California public high school prepared her for college-level work.<sup>6</sup>

"I pulled out a notebook and began to scribble down every detail of the freshman expository writing course administration our preceptor was describing..."

'Excuse me, but...,' I spluttered, 'You said our first paper is 'four to five'; that's what? Paragraphs?' My preceptor wryly smiled at me and pronounced: 'Pages. That's four to five pages.'

"I had never written more than five paragraphs for any essay or paper in my entire academic career prior to entering [Harvard] University. Not one. Now, I tell you, I wrote one fine five-paragraph essay, but no one ever told me that would become a completely worthless skill after Advanced Placement exams were done and your high school GPA was calculated. No one ever thought to mention to me that the college papers I had been warned about would be quantitatively and substantively vastly different from the little expository essay with its introduction, conclusion, and three body paragraphs.

"I thought a required freshman writing course was meant to *introduce* us to college paper-writing. In reality, the course was a refresher for most of the other students in the class. At a high-level academic institution, too many of the students come from private schools that have realized that it would be an academic failure on their parts to send their students to college without experience with longer papers, research environments, exposure to non-fiction literature, and knowledge of bibliographic techniques. And they're right. It is a failure, one being perpetrated by too many public high schools across the nation.

"...This lack of forethought on the part of high school educators and administrators is creating a large divide among college students—and it's one that helps neither the students nor their alumni institutions. Modern public high schools have an obligation not to simply pump out graduates at the end of the year, but also to prepare their students for the intellectual rigors of college."

**Contrasting Views of High School (HS) Teachers and College Professors on Students’ Preparation for College-Level Academic Demands**

Teachers’ Observations of Students’ Abilities:	Not Well Prepared		Somewhat Prepared		Very Well Prepared		Don’t Know	
	College	HS	College	HS	College	HS	College	HS
School Level	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Oral Skills	19	14	65	55	15	26	3	5
Writing	44	10	47	49	6	36	3	4
Reading Difficult Matter	41	15	48	56	10	26	2	3
Study Habits	41	30	50	53	7	15	2	2
Seek Resources	26	19	55	54	12	23	6	4
Research Skills	49	18	42	53	4	26	6	3

**College Professors’ views of HS graduates’ writing skills: 91% not very well-prepared.**  
**College Professors’ views of HS graduates’ reading skills: 89% not very well-prepared.**  
**College Professors’ views of HS graduates’ research skills: 91% not very well-prepared.**

Source: The Chronicle of Higher Education<sup>5</sup>

NAEP-takers reached writing proficiency. Research and test scores indicate that these students may perform poorly on writing assessments specifically because they do not know how to describe or express in writing something they have learned.

Perhaps not surprisingly, this problem is reflected in the disconnection between what high school teachers reportedly perceive as “preparedness” and the skills that college professors report they need to see in students, which are to analyze, describe or express in writing something they have learned. The great number of college students assigned to remedial courses of study (what many professors describe as “paying to do high school over again”) is a testament to the need for students to be proficient in academic writing before they are granted high school diplomas.

These national data suggest that academic writing is in terrible shape. A parallel in mathematics would mean that students are stuck at the decimals and fractions level by the end of high school. The art and science of the research paper—the gathering, interpretation, documentation of details, development and organization of ideas and conclusions and clear communication of them—has lost its prominence in K-12 curricula nationwide. This, despite the fact that the skills learned through writing a research

paper are not only mandatory in college but also the exact same skills needed for effective writing in business and civic life. Moreover, they are also in the state’s curriculum frameworks for both history and English.

With regard to Massachusetts, these data beg the question: Why do some students graduate high school without the skills necessary to communicate effectively in writing? Although it would be easy to point to the quality of state writing standards, the strength of Massachusetts’ standards and their close alignment to NAEP (already discussed above) are often cited by education authorities both inside and outside of the state. Moreover, it is clear that Massachusetts’ standards emphasize exactly the kinds of writing skills that professors hope to see in college classrooms (see page 3).

Another possible reason for the poor performance of some students is the teaching tools that teachers have access to and/or use in the classroom. For example, the Massachusetts ELA frameworks specifically address the use of technology in writing instruction: “The availability of computers offers teachers many opportunities to enhance the teaching of composition. Because computers allow for easy manipulation of text, their use can motivate students to review their work and make thoughtful revisions.”<sup>77</sup> In order to

take full advantage of the modern tools that are used in college and the workplace, additional thought and resources should be put into making word processing technology available to all students, along with appropriate training to their teachers. Indeed, a worthy goal is the online administration of MCAS by 2015—if accomplished, this would better align the assessment experience with the college and work experiences that students will have after high school. Importantly, this 21st-century enhancement would not require any changes in the writing, language or media standards (which are already clear and comprehensive) or the assessments themselves. However, ensuring equal access to technology and that district curricula are aligned with state curriculum frameworks is a necessary first step.

That said, as compelling as the argument for better resources in classrooms may be, there is evidence that resources, or a lack thereof, are not really the heart of the problem. A 2006 Pioneer Institute study, *Aligning District Curricula with State Frameworks*, found that thirteen years after the passage of the 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act, a majority of the Commonwealth’s urban districts had still not aligned their local curricula with the state curriculum frameworks.<sup>8</sup> This study suggests not only that urban students are being tested on academic content they have not been taught, but also that these students cannot access the rich liberal arts content on which state standards and expectations for better writing are based. Indeed, in places like Boston, the use of a teaching method that stresses personal writing, not the expository writing expected of students on MCAS, NAEP and in college, may be the main reason that students are not learning how to communicate effectively.

### **Poor Alignment Between State Writing Standards and Teaching Methods**

In truth, the gap between what students need to know to be successful and what they are taught in schools cannot be blamed on K-12 schools and teachers alone. Schools of education do not explicitly instruct teacher candidates in the teaching of expository writing. That is, they do not give teacher candidates

the tools for teaching middle or high school students how to respond analytically in writing to something that they have learned, read or carefully observed.

In large measure, prospective teachers are instructed in how to promote the use of various “writing processes,” typically for experience-based writing. Therefore, without the knowledge to teach different approaches to writing, teachers often fall back on the vagaries of the process approach or formulaic methods of instruction that they learned in high school. They teach writing almost like an algebraic equation, complete with jargon and color-coding. As a result, students often don’t learn about writing as a creative method of communication with a reader.

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The influence of schools of education can be seen in the writing process approaches that are now widespread in elementary and middle schools. For over two decades the most popular program, Writer’s Workshop, developed in 1981 at Teachers College, has been the basis of most writing instruction. The Writer’s Workshop’s methods (which go by many names, including Reader’s and Writer’s Workshop, Six Traits, Write Source, and Writer’s Advantage) are the most popular methods for teaching writing, despite the fact that, “there is no independent research to back the efficacy of the programs.”<sup>9</sup>

The workshop approach to writing instruction scorns direct instruction, and instead focuses on small group work where children consult each other, not the teacher, as much as possible. In this context, the phrase “Ask three before me”<sup>10</sup> is often posted in workshop classrooms—implying that a child’s fellow elementary students could be more knowledgeable

about writing than a professional teacher. Since the Writer's Workshop, however, is more about process than content, it could, in some cases, be true that students are more knowledgeable than teachers. The lack of direct instruction in the Writer's Workshop leaves many children, especially those who come to the classroom unmotivated or with less preparation than their peers, at a disadvantage.<sup>11</sup>

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In the writing workshop, both the teacher and student must be highly intuitive and independently motivated. The vehicles for skill acquisition are teacher-created "mini-lessons," which are developed by each teacher based on his or her own classroom observations. Teachers are also told that it is critical for them to hold extensive conferences with each student, during which the teacher is encouraged to give only oral feedback. The assumption is that all teachers possess the expertise required to diagnose which skills students need to learn at each point in their development as writers, and that they can create appropriate mini-lessons and instructive conferences on demand. The Writer's Workshop process does not concern itself with grammar or conventions until the final "publishing" stage, thus reinforcing over and over again to students that writing correctly is less essential to communicating their ideas than producing a draft. Instead of preparing students for serious writing in college and in the workplace, we are leading them to believe that professors and employers will be interested in numerous imperfect drafts and the time it takes to produce them. The reality is: they will not.

Another concern is the Writer's Workshop's reliance on personal narratives as vehicles for writing, to the detriment of students' abilities to write analytical, persuasive, comparative, informational or other types of expository writing. These are the writing skills most needed for the workplace or for academic or

professional work. They are also the skills evaluated on standardized assessments. In the Writer's Workshop, students are instructed to write about "things that matter to them," but there are no provisions for students to learn the things—the content—that would prepare them to form opinions about what truly matters. Many practitioners believe that the method has become too prescriptive, even rigid,<sup>12</sup> in the rules for what students and teachers may and may not do—and even write about—in the process. This is not a recipe for success in higher education or for meeting an employer's needs. Personal writing has its place in creative writing programs or diaries but not in instructional manuals, analyses of social or academic issues or general informational writing.

One typical text about conducting writer's workshops is teacher and author Nancie Atwell's 1987 book, *In the Middle*. This book became *de rigueur* reading in schools of education, among middle school teachers, and in professional development, and laid the groundwork for the middle school writing workshop, with processes based on peer and self-editing. As a result, it distanced the classroom teacher so far from instruction that he or she was instructed as follows (among other things):

- Don't look at or read students' writing during conferences
- Don't tell students that editorial issues matter until the final draft
- Don't tell writers what they should do or what should be in their writing
- Don't write on students' writing
- Don't praise

However, in Atwell's second edition, published in 1998, she did an about-face in her approach to writing instruction, scrapping 70 percent<sup>13</sup> of the original book and its techniques and replacing her earlier methodology with the concept of interventions on the part of the teacher, returning the teacher to the center of the writing classroom. In this revision, she advocated a much more active role for teachers, proclaiming, "I'm no longer willing to withhold

suggestions and directions from my kids when I can help them solve a problem, do something they've never done before and produce stunning writing."<sup>14</sup>

By the time Atwell had determined that writing teachers should, in her words, re-invent themselves as “Teachers with a capital T,” her earlier system had become so entrenched in classrooms—along with what Atwell herself lamented was a focus on the perfection of the method—that it seems that almost no one was listening to her when the empress announced she had been wearing no clothes.

Combined with the limitation of direct instruction in the Writer’s Workshop is the problem that the approach fails to teach students how to organize and present coherently the gist and analysis of something read or observed. The founder of the movement, Lucy Calkins, explains that she wants to “spotlight reading and writing in and of themselves,” and that these disciplines should not be “in the service of thematic studies.”<sup>15</sup> However, the idea that all writing should be personal—even suggesting that students’ opinions, personal comments and experiences are privileged above the facts in the text, thus turning students into readers unprepared to understand what the author of a text (oral or written) has said or implied—is contrary to the core of analytical writing and to the needs of the future consumers of student-writers’ writing.

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Writing is difficult work, and academic writing is next to impossible if the student has not been encouraged to write in an informed way in response to academic content or substance. Since teachers feel the pressure to have students “produce” many drafts of a piece of writing, however short or superficial they may be, the

importance of composing something substantive gets lost in the maze of processes.<sup>16</sup>

Critics of an approach focusing only on the process of writing say that in order to be effective, students should read and write about culturally or historically significant ideas and texts beyond those that are directly relevant to their own personal lives. Broadening one’s knowledge base strengthens comprehension, improves vocabulary and creates the civic and global awareness that is so important in this century. In other words, in order to be a good writer, students should have ideas and information to write *about*. Learning and writing about the world outside of oneself is the mark of the curious citizen and the informative writer. It is not clear, however, that all Massachusetts students are exposed to important ideas and information through the curricula they encounter in schools.

### The Importance of Reading to the Writing Curriculum

Over the past few decades, students have not been generally encouraged to read non-fiction, the “classics” or even our nation’s Founding documents, thereby leaving them with a dearth of what Professor E.D. Hirsch describes as *core knowledge and cultural literacy*. Familiarity with a common core of knowledge, gleaned from well-rounded reading in the liberal arts, gives students (and other writers) a common language through which to communicate with their audience. On the “Core Knowledge Blog,” education consultant and former teacher and business executive Robert Pondiscio points out that:

“President Obama’s 2009 Inaugural Address placed us — all of us — in the flow of history. With its references to the “rights of man,” our “common defense,” ideals that “light the world,” and a generation that “faced down communism and fascism,” the address was surely met with nods from some and blank stares from others. If our children do not know the events and phrases to which Obama referred, they cannot fully appreciate the significance of this moment or even what this President is asking of them. How is it possible for



them to be “the keepers of this legacy” — why should they value it and seek to keep it at all? — Unless they understand the thing they are being asked to keep?”<sup>17</sup>

Although Pondiscio is not speaking of the subject at hand directly, his point is well taken. The more one knows, the more one understands. Interpreted to address the current topic, this suggests that the more one knows and understands, the more substantive one’s writing will be.

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Professor Hirsch supports this contention when he points out that, “Cognitive psychologists have determined that when a text is being understood, the reader (or listener) is filling in a lot of the unstated connections between the words to create an imagined situation model based on domain-specific knowledge. . . . To understand language, whether written or spoken, we need to construct a situation model consisting of meanings construed from the explicit words of the text as well as meanings inferred or constructed from relevant background knowledge. The spoken and the unspoken taken together constitute the meaning. Without this relevant, unspoken background knowledge, we can’t understand the text.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, by shunting aside classic readings that give students a particular kind of knowledge, far too many schools and teachers are preventing students from reading to learn—the effects of this deprivation are especially harmful for those students who cannot rely on their home environments to provide them with knowledge particular to American society or to certain segments of American society. In brief, some schools are preventing students from having interesting things *to write about*.

The absence of key texts from the curricula of many school districts only exacerbates the issues already posed by ineffective methods for teaching writing. If Massachusetts’ schools are going to produce better student writers, they need to consider reading and writing, or what the state calls English language arts, as a comprehensive subject. If teachers and district officials would stop to consider the educational content to which students in elite private schools and top-scoring suburban districts are exposed, they would understand, much like the Harvard student quoted above, that “the classics” and similar documents, combined with the right teaching methods and opportunities in high school to perform college level writing could make all the difference for the state’s low-performing students. Indeed, to deny the largely urban student access to the rich material available to their—often more privileged—peers amounts to what former President Bush once referred to as “the soft bigotry of low expectations.”<sup>19</sup>

## **A Better Way**

Although it is clear that some schools persist in using ineffective methods for teaching writing, especially at the middle school and high school levels, there are examples of research-based and content-rich writing instruction being used in pockets around the state. For example, the Writers’ Express (WEX), an organization currently working with teachers and literacy coaches in Springfield, aims to give students the tools they need to develop academic knowledge and the skills to communicate that knowledge clearly. Springfield, which is a good example of a school district—like Boston—where a majority of students are not proficient in the core skills assessed by the state, is benefiting from this program’s intense focus on the core skills and conceptual knowledge outlined in the state’s standards.

But what about students and teachers who do not have the benefit of an organization such as Writer’s Express? School districts and teachers can more effectively help students develop their own voices and ideas across multiple subjects by focusing on knowledge- and skill-building, rather than the self-centeredness of the Writer’s Workshop. Direct

instruction, as opposed to the group-centered and collaborative methods emphasized in many classrooms today, focuses teachers and students on building those skills that research has shown have the greatest impact on student writing. It also helps teachers avoid the chaos and confusion of the workshop method, where instruction is based not on the acquisition and display of knowledge but on the intuitions of the teacher and student.

Direct instruction programs (which are supported by the guiding principles of the ELA framework) encourage students to become better writers by breaking down the complex challenge of teaching writing into a sequence of clearly defined skills that are taught through a cycle of practice-instruction-revision, which enables teachers to keep working with each student on a specific skill or convention until he or she masters it. Teachers can and should develop the tools needed to become active instructors of effective skills and the creative process in the writing classroom. Rather than demonstrate a skill in a mini-lesson before sending students out to experiment with its application in consultation with their peers, teachers using direct instructional methods employ exercises that focus on specific skills until they are mastered and *before* they are used in student writing.

It is important to realize that direct instruction need not hamper creativity. Creativity is not stifled by high levels of facility with the rules of Standard English, but is enhanced by it. When a writer writes clearly, he or she can soar to great creative heights, unleashed from the bounds of awkward structures in compositions that make it difficult for a reader to grasp meaning. Student Achievement Partners, a group from New York, makes the case that “deliberate practice” is at the root of all high-level performance and that sophisticated skills can only be developed by repetition with feedback. Deliberate practice can only happen if there is a very clear sense of what needs to be practiced and how it will be measured.

Focusing on a broader range of skills than those emphasized in the Writer’s Workshop method will also help Massachusetts’ teachers to better align

their teaching with the state curriculum frameworks. Massachusetts’ ELA principles and curriculum frameworks are comprehensive. However, as the National Council of Teachers of English points out in its position paper on the teaching of writing, “in order to provide quality opportunities for student writing, teachers must...understand how to interpret curriculum documents, including things that can be taught while students are actually writing.”<sup>20</sup> So, no matter how excellent the state frameworks are, if they are not being understood and used as they were intended, they may as well not exist. If all aspects of the frameworks are addressed and taught, and if teachers are given support by districts as they strive to understand the frameworks and how those frameworks correspond to the life skills that students need, we may see many more students reaching levels of proficiency.

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### *Support for Schools from the Community*

Of course, schools and districts need not rely only on existing resources to improve their approaches to teaching writing. There are many supports within the local and even the national community that can help educators and policy makers hone in on the writing skills that students need and effective ways for teaching those skills.

- *The Concord Review* has a novel and easily-enacted long-range proposal for bringing all students to the point of competence in writing an informative and clear research paper of a dozen pages by the time they graduate from high school. It is called the “Page Per Year Plan,” under which each first grader would be required to write a one-page paper on a subject other than him or herself, with at least one source. A page would be added each year to the required

academic writing, such that sixth graders would have to write a six-page paper (using six sources), ninth graders would have to write a nine-page, nine-source research paper, and so on, until each and every senior would be required to prepare a 12-page academic research paper with twelve sources, including endnotes and bibliography, on a legitimate academic topic of the student's choice.<sup>21</sup> This would prepare students for future academic writing and greatly reduce the need for remedial instruction in writing (and reading) at the college level.

- The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation—the largest private education donor in the country—spent the last 10 years trying to reshape high schools into smaller communities, but this initiative did not lead to specific gains in student performance. That billion-dollar experiment has informed the foundation's most recent strategy, announced in November 2008, which focuses on national standards. One of the aspects of the foundation's revamped approach to improving American schools is a parallel effort to create a national assessment based on those standards that would be distributed nationally. Work has quietly begun on these projects, and it is to be hoped that they will be based on the type of in-depth frameworks that have resulted in Massachusetts' remarkable, but improvable, success, as well as on our MCAS format, where multiple choice takes a back seat to composition and open response.
- The Gates Foundation also points out that although states have adopted standards for what students should know and be able to do, they often encourage breadth over depth and rigor. As a result, American education is “a mile wide and an inch deep,” covering far more material than teachers can ever hope to deliver, while giving students only a shallow understanding of complex topics.<sup>22</sup> Extending the standards to separate out nebulous and difficult-to-measure skills already covered in the frameworks – as the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills Task Force proposes – is counterproductive, especially when educators have not achieved a consensus on how to best

teach the core academic language skills that lead to student success.

- In 2006, recognizing the field's propensity to teach process over content in both reading and writing, the Massachusetts Adolescent Literacy Task Force (under a grant from the National Governors Association) developed recommendations for enhancing English curricula and assessments in the Commonwealth, which include a greater emphasis on reading and writing for information. The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, in fall, 2007, authorized the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to review and update the 2003 ELA curriculum frameworks, as part of a regular schedule of revisiting them. One of the goals of the revision was an emphasis on expository reading and writing. This draft revision is a detailed effort to improve on the laudable ELA standards in the state; however, if school districts do not do a better job, in general, of aligning local curricula and teaching methods with the revised frameworks, the work of the DESE will be meaningless.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the compelling evidence presented here, further research is needed to better understand what real writing skills—both traditional and electronic—for the 21<sup>st</sup> century encompass. Such research should also aim to ascertain which methods produce liberally educated and competent student-writers who have the skills and confidence to produce clear, knowledgeable and informative writing on demand. The key to writing development is clear, sequenced instruction, combined with a solid diet of high quality non-fiction reading that will give students access to information and learning about which to write. Students need experience reading, analyzing, and writing about informational and content-rich texts, which will prepare them for college and career success.

The less-than-adequate results of the Writer's Workshop approach to teaching writing is evident

in both employers' and college professors' disappointment with high school graduates' communication skills, and demonstrates what happens when educators encourage "process" over direct instruction. It is that confusion that we are trying to avoid by recommending that teachers follow the clear expectations that already exist in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. We should continue to build on the clear academic goals already embedded in the state's 2003 composition standards with carefully researched instructional methods.

### Endnotes

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**PIONEER INSTITUTE**  
PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH

85 Devonshire Street, 8th Floor, Boston, MA 02109 |  
T: 617.723.2277 F: 617.723.1880 |  
[www.pioneerinstitute.org](http://www.pioneerinstitute.org)