

The Status of WAC in Secondary Public Schools: What Do We Know?

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It's a cloudy Thursday morning in November, and the university writing center is humming. A peer tutor sits at a table near the center of the room, listening to a sophomore explain her essay assignment for a recreational therapy class while a second tutor helps a freshman fine tune his thesis statement for a research paper. In the far corner, a third tutor works at a computer, responding to an on-line submission from a student in a local high school's creative writing class. The director is conferring with a member of the mathematics department on ways to include meaningful writing activities in an advanced calculus class. It's a typical day at a college-level writing center, but it raises a question for educators. Are similar scenes occurring in our public secondary schools?

As an awareness of the importance of writing as a means of learning has grown, the writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) movement has gained momentum on college campuses. One response to this increased focus on the importance of writing in the learning process has been the establishment of writing centers at hundreds of colleges and universities. These centers are designed to serve the needs of both students and faculty and aim to support learning in all fields. While these programs have flourished in many post-secondary settings, formal WAC programs in general and writing centers in particular still seem to be something of an exception in secondary public schools; however, interest in these practices appears to be growing there as well.

A number of publications show an increasing integration of WAC philosophy and strategies into secondary public school settings. Pamela Farrell's *The High School Writing Center: Establishing and Maintaining One* not only provides practical information on designing and running writing labs in secondary schools, but also illustrates the variety of forms

that writing centers have taken in public schools and the range of functions they have performed. More recent publications demonstrate the wide range of applications possible for WAC practices in public schools. *The Astonishing Curriculum: Integrating Science and Humanities through Language*, edited by Stephen Tchudi, presents descriptions of classrooms and courses from elementary through college level where the mathematics, science, and English curricula are fully integrated and complementary elements of a unified learning experience. *Exchanging Lives: Middle School Writers Online*, by Scott Christian, demonstrates the impact electronic technology has had on increasing the integration of WAC practices in public schools through its description of an online conversation between middle school students in five classrooms scattered across the United States. *Programs and Practices: Writing Across the Secondary School Curriculum*, which is edited by Pamela Farrell-Childers, Anne Ruggles Gere and Art Young, chronicles the experiences of teachers across the country as they integrated WAC philosophy and strategies into their own classrooms and schools. The book also documents examples of collaborations between secondary classrooms and college-level classes – especially teacher education courses. Recent articles by Jacqueline N. Glasgow in *English Journal* and Donna Niday and Mark Campbell in *Voices in the Middle* describe programs where electronic technology and buddy journals have made cross-age and distance mentoring and communications possible. All of these publications show that many public school teachers and some administrators are taking the initiative by including WAC practices in their own classrooms and by encouraging other teachers to join them in informal WAC programs. These initiatives, however, often seem to be the result of the efforts of a few individuals collaborating with like-minded colleagues rather than the outcome of any school-wide or district-wide commitment to WAC philosophy. In other words, WAC appears to be integrating itself into individual secondary public schools primarily through the actions of one or two educators at a time.

My own experiences as an educator support this impression. For eleven years, I primarily taught seventh and eighth grade language arts, reading, and social studies in both a large traditional junior high school in Fullerton, California, and a small regional middle school in Tilton, New Hampshire. While I was in California, most of my classes were part of a then-experimental program where I had the same students for multiple periods and was responsible for teaching them multiple subjects in a fully

integrated format. The cross-curricular nature of those classes led me to search for ways to meaningfully incorporate writing in all areas of the program, and that search evolved into a strong interest in WAC studies and practices. The happy fact that my California classroom was directly connected to a 17-computer writing lab also led me to pursue ways to use electronic technology to support my students' developing literacy. At that time, I gained professional support and information through workshops and seminars conducted by the California Writing Project and the University of California, Irvine, rather than from my own school administrators and colleagues. A few years after returning to New Hampshire, I was able to pursue my growing interest in WAC philosophy and composition studies by enrolling in the University of New Hampshire's graduate English program for teachers. As part of my studies at UNH, I worked with Dr. Cinthia Gannett, the director of the R. J. Connors Memorial Writing Center and the campus WAC program, to design an independent study where I could both work in the University Writing Center and participate in possible collaborations between the university and public secondary schools.

During the 2000 summer session at UNH, Dr. Gannett taught a course entitled "Writing To Learn Across the Curriculum." Teachers and graduate students from across New England gathered to discuss the possibilities and problems involved in establishing WAC programs and writing centers in their own schools. Some participants came from schools where "writing labs" already existed as a space where a group of computers dedicated to word processing were clustered and supervised by assorted staff members, while others had no personal experience with writing centers and writing labs. Part of the challenge of the class was to expand the educators' views of the many shapes writing centers could take and what functions they might perform. Over the course of several weeks, members of the class evolved and refined their personal visions of what writing centers can be and then designed potential writing centers for their own school settings, taking into consideration such issues as space, function, funding, and staffing. As a result of the strong interest shown by the participants in the course, Dr. Gannett wanted to continue and extend the conversations about WAC programs and writing centers in public schools that the class had initiated. In the fall of 2000, she and I decided to try to gain some initial insight into the status of WAC programs and writing centers in public middle and high schools within New Hampshire. As a

beginning step, I wrote a brief survey and posted it on the EngEdNH liserv established by Linda Stimson at the New Hampshire Department of Education. This survey was an attempt to establish baseline information on the status of writing-across-the-curriculum programs and the existence of writing centers in public secondary schools in New Hampshire. It was also a move toward identifying schools and individual classrooms that might be interested in developing collaborations with existing college and university writing centers or specific college-level courses. The two of us then distributed copies of the survey during the NHATE (New Hampshire Association of Teachers of English) Fall Luncheon. In a third attempt to gain information, I used a list of online links to New Hampshire public schools through the New Hampshire Department of Education website (www.ed.state.nh.us) to identify the names and school e-mail addresses of a number of secondary teachers in the state. These teachers were then sent explanatory e-mails that included a copy of the survey.

After distributing over one hundred of the surveys to teachers associated with approximately forty middle schools and high schools in New Hampshire, we received only ten responses. In retrospect, it seems that our initial appeals were not adequate to gain enough data to draw meaningful conclusions or even to clearly indicate to what extent WAC programs and writing centers exist within middle/high schools in New Hampshire. It appears that the only way to obtain the kind of information that we desire may be to personally approach and interview as many middle school and secondary teachers within the state as we can. One place to take this next step may be through one of the Summer Institute classes that is being offered through the English department at UNH this summer or through some similar group or setting. This approach, however, is quite time-intensive and still might not be broad enough to yield a true picture of the status of WAC programs and writing centers in public secondary schools. However, Dr. Gannett and I continue to look for ways to increase our pool of information. In the meantime, the initial responses we received have yielded some interesting insights into what may be occurring in some public secondary schools, as well as suggesting the kinds of questions that might best be asked at this point in the process of gathering data.

Based on the responses we have received so far, there appear to be some self-identified WAC programs or policies within the state's public

high schools. When respondents were asked if their schools presently have a WAC program or policy, only one respondent answered with an unequivocal “Yes.” Other respondents, however, indicated varying levels of awareness of WAC practices and philosophy within their schools. A second teacher stated that although her school did not have a formal WAC program, the faculty had received training in WAC and that “the integration of writing through all curriculum areas has been important to us.” A third said her school had “abandoned attempts” to implement a WAC program and writing center in the past due to a lack of “funds, space, [and] interest.” All three of these responses show at least an awareness of WAC practices and at least some recognition of their inclusion within public secondary schools. They also suggest that perhaps we should seek more detailed information about specific types of WAC practices rather than the existence of formal WAC programs or policies.

Another item that appeared on two surveys and also turned up in conversations with teachers from two other districts is the fact that several schools have had their staff members participate in specific writing-training programs. During the past few years, at least three schools in central New Hampshire have participated in a program of training provided by The NETWORK and Collins Education Associates that is self-described as promoting writing across the curriculum. I have also attended one of Dr. John J. Collins’ workshops and have read one of his publications, *Implementing the Cumulative Writing Folder Program*. I have used a number of his suggestions in my own classes with varying degrees of success. However, I am concerned by the possible perception in some schools that his program is the ultimate and best way to implement WAC policies and practices.

The Collins program is a very attractive package, and Dr. Collins is a dynamic and persuasive speaker. His workshops and publications incorporate many ideas and practices from WAC literature – writing-to-learn, write-pair-share, etc. – but these practices are embedded in a program that is highly structured and inflexible, and the regimentation of the program is touted as one of its strengths and selling points. For example, what Collins defines as “Type 1” writing assignments are primarily brainstorming or typical learning log entries, but in his program these assignments are also timed and evaluated according to the number of lines of text each student produces. According to Collins, the program’s regimentation of writing situations and formats leads to ease in evaluation for

the teacher and confidence-through-familiarity for the student. Collins states that his program is most effective if all the staff of a given school are trained in and using the same procedures. All students in every class should head their papers in the same manner, all should identify each piece of writing as “Type 1-5,” and all should number the lines on the page and only write on every other line. Therefore, students will only have to be trained once in the correct way to format papers – a cross-curricular benefit, according to Collins, for all teachers. Certain types of writing will always have identified “Focus Correction Areas” at the top of the paper with points assigned for each area to determine the grade on the paper. This procedure is intended to not only help students identify and focus on specific writing skills in a given assignment, but to also help teachers in all curricular areas feel more comfortable about evaluating students’ writing. All of the students’ writing assignments are then to be kept at school in special folders that are marketed by the NETWORK.

The Collins program does incorporate many elements of WAC theory, but is it a WAC program? While Dr. Collins presents legitimate and logical reasons for the rules that make up the Collins method, it is the regimentation of the whole package that is finally so troubling. Does this program truly reflect WAC practice and philosophy? Does it genuinely help teachers incorporate WAC into their classes, and does it really help students write to learn? Finally, how much can the interest in these programs be attributed to the public scrutiny being focused on students’ writing abilities through the lens of standardized tests? Are these training workshops primarily designed to increase students’ writing abilities or to boost their test scores? In the workshop I attended, Dr. Collins strongly suggested that the implementation of his program would increase students’ scores on statewide assessment tests. Given the influence this and similar training programs may be having on secondary public schools’ understanding of what constitutes WAC philosophy and practice, feedback from participants in these programs may be of great interest to educators in the field.

In terms of writing centers in public secondary schools, those who responded that their school did have some sort of “writing center” described it primarily in terms of how many computers their center had. One teacher described an 18-computer “writing lab,” another mentioned “30 iMacs connected to the school server,” and an administrator listed “24 IBM Pentium[s]...networked [and] connected to Internet through a

dedicated T-1 line staffed by English teachers 7 periods a day.” This common identification of a “writing center” with a computer lab raises another interesting point. Pamela B. Childers recently wrote, in “Secondary School CAC/WAC and Writing Centers,” that “[w]hether intentionally or as a result of paradigm shifts in educational institutions, Communication Across the Curriculum exists in middle schools and high schools across the country.” Her article then goes on to describe a number of ways that electronic technology has become the means to increase WAC/CAC practices in science classrooms in particular and in other fields as well. In fact, based on several of the aforementioned books and articles on WAC programs, it could be argued that the introduction of electronic technology into classrooms appears to be one of the main ways that WAC practices and policies are spreading through secondary public schools. However, while technology often plays a vital role in writing centers, we should not lose sight of the fact that access to word processing programs, e-mail, the Internet, and the like is only a part of what a commitment to WAC philosophy in general and a writing center in particular can offer to a school’s curriculum. The lack of computer access in my New Hampshire classroom did not cause me to abandon my commitment to WAC philosophy; that lack simply encouraged me to find alternative means of incorporating WAC practices into my curriculum. Therefore, Dr. Gannett and I see a real need to expand secondary public school educators’ visions of what WAC means and of what a “writing center” could be and could do. At the same time, since an increasing number of schools do have computer clusters available, teachers need more information and resources on how to use that technology in order to promote literacy and connections rather than limiting the use of computers to word processing and research.

What teachers and administrators seem to need most is more – and quality – information. In response to a survey question about what information or support would be most helpful in promoting WAC/writing center awareness, one teacher wrote, “Basics! Starter info.” They need the opportunity to explore the scope of ideas and practices that WAC encompasses as well as the benefits these practices hold for students. Another said, “Information on money and time for training, space needs, and the impact on schedule.” They need to have their understanding of WAC expanded beyond a single workshop or an introduction to one person’s writing program into an understanding of how WAC policies might work in

their schools. A third wrote, “Logistics. Grants.” They also need a vision and some kind of support system as they explore the possibilities.

So, to what extent are there WAC programs in New Hampshire public secondary schools? That question still remains to be answered. There are obviously many teachers including WAC practices in their classes, but whether or not they recognize these activities as being a part of WAC philosophy and policy is not clear. The question of how to provide information about and ongoing support for WAC programs in New Hampshire’s public schools also remains unanswered. There seems to be a very great need in this area, and with the inclusion of writing competencies in state standardized testing, this need may become increasingly obvious.

One small way to begin may be with the creation of informal networks of support and communication. Both the EngEdNH listserv and NHATE Newsletter could provide forums for sharing information, ideas, and concerns about WAC practices and policies as well as the potential of writing centers within public schools. In the meantime, Dr. Gannett and I will continue to consider ways to gather information about the status of WAC programs in New Hampshire secondary public schools.

One of the most promising areas for support of secondary school WAC programs may be through college and university classes. The faculty at colleges and universities could actively promote collaborations between their writing centers and education classes on the one hand and local secondary public schools on the other. These collaborations could provide powerful support for WAC efforts in public schools while also broadening the experiences of the college students involved in the programs. Books like Farrell-Childers, Gere, and Young’s *Programs and Practices* and articles like the one written by Niday and Campbell demonstrate how mutually beneficial such programs can be. We can only hope that interest in these collaborations will grow along with our understanding of WAC practices at the secondary level.

- To subscribe to the EngEdNH listserv, send a message of “subscribe engednh” followed by your e-mail address to Majordomo@nici-mc2.org

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