

THE AGE OF STUDENT-RUN WRITING CENTERS

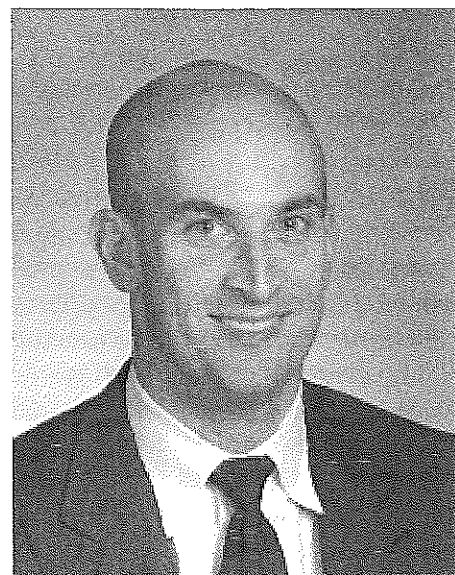
BY DAVE GOLDFARB

In my school district, Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS), the age of high school student-run writing centers is upon us. I first became aware of high schools operating a student-run writing center a few years ago when a fellow teacher-consultant from a neighboring school district shared what was happening in her school. More recently, I learned a great deal about the work in FCPS through conversations with **Amber Jensen**, the founder of the writing center at Edison High School.

Currently, 15 high schools in FCPS are operating a student-run writing center. Some of my colleagues have started suggesting a writing center in the school where I work. For many reasons, having a student-run writing center is an exciting prospect. First and foremost, a writing center provides another forum for developing student writers. As a NVWP teacher consultant who has moved from the classroom to the principal's office, I am excited about an enhanced role for writing in the classroom and the number of classrooms where it is happening. Furthermore, a writing center reinforces the importance of the writing process because different levels of feedback can be given at different times. By giving our student writers a peer reviewer, a writing center also encourages teachers—all teachers—to incorporate formal and informal writing into their classroom tasks. Writing does not belong exclusively to the English department, yet most student writing happens in English classes because the elements and structures of writing are most closely linked to the high school English curriculum.

Yet, as a principal, I am hesitant to create a student-run writing center where I work unless strategic steps are taken to connect it to larger instructional programs and ensure it supports other school-wide goals. Creating a writing center on its own, I do not believe, means that, "if you build it [a writing center], they [students and teachers] will come." I have seen writing centers and other programs fail to make impact because of a failure of leadership. It is important for teacher leaders and school leaders to work together to identify the purpose and the role of their writing center. Is it to increase the number of classrooms where writing is happening throughout the

school? Support students in their learning across disciplines? Help teachers develop in giving more authentic tasks and growth-producing feedback? Will the writing center (and its directors) be the driver of a writing program in the school, or a source of support for needs identified by teachers or students? Some of the answers may emerge as part of the implementation process, but not anticipating or foreseeing these questions in advance can doom a worthy venture from the very start.



NVWP TC Dave Goldfarb

Creating a school-wide initiative or program such as a writing center requires plenty of strategic thinking. A writing center will only be as successful as the frequency and quality of its use. Building a sustainable program requires gaining support from students and teachers by showing how it will meet their needs. It is important for teacher leaders to have their programs supported by the school leadership and see how a writing center could fit the vision of the school leadership. As a principal, I welcome teacher leaders sharing ideas and helping explore how strong classroom practice can be incorporated into a school's instructional plan. Getting encouragement from the school administration and the Instructional Council can increase the likelihood of initial success. One way is that the leadership sets an expectation for curricular departments to incorporate the writing center as part of the process for their students to complete some of their instructional tasks.

Momentum needed for such a significant initiative can be generated in other ways. Faculty support can also emerge after a small group of teachers models a program's success. A major benefit of this

approach is that the program has already proven successful, and the documented evidence of success garners further support. There are also fewer concerns or questions about implementation because other teachers have evidence of student achievement. This second method was used by teachers to create the first writing center in FCPS two years ago at Edison High School. A small corps of English teachers believed a writing center would help them overcome significant obstacles to providing quality writing instruction. Such obstacles included rising class sizes and greater need for differentiation. Four English teachers put a call out for a leadership team of student writers, and required an application. Thirty tutors were accepted and trained.

The Edison teacher leaders who founded the writing center faced the challenge of getting buy-in from their colleagues. The principal allowed the idea of a writing center to be pitched at a faculty meeting. Some Edison teachers excitedly jumped on board, as they had seen the need themselves. Teachers who already incorporated writing into their assignments and tasks are a ready-made audience for writing centers. However, occasionally, teacher leaders can be viewed negatively by their colleagues when they suggest change is needed, especially if that change will affect their work. Teachers in schools with such a culture often resist actively and/or passively when one of their peers steps forward to have influence over more than just his or her classroom. Many teachers are uncomfortable hearing from colleagues that their instruction should change to better serve students. Their discomfort increases if they are unsure if they can be successful with the suggested methods. Many high school teachers who are not confident in their own writing ability are reluctant to teach writing and create little space for student writing in their courses.

In many schools, teachers standing in front of their colleagues and leading without formal authority brings disruption to a school culture of egalitarianism and isolation. For these reasons, it is important for teacher leaders to seek out support from both administrators and peers. At Edison, the school-based writing center allows for teachers to find leadership opportunities. In creating a writing center, or initiating any change that impacts a large section of an organization, effective and protected implementation must

follow the strategic planning. Any early impact or successes will build credibility among the interested on-lookers. The number of "early adopters" will increase if there are ways that the changes can be shown to support student growth and facilitate teacher efforts. It is very unlikely that the change can be undertaken exactly as planned, and it is important to be flexible enough to adjust to growing pains or unintended consequences.

Like most pilot programs, the Edison Writing Center (EWC) started small. As the writing center was not connected to any course or curricular program, students could only visit the writing center after school one day a week. This limited the number of students who could benefit from the writing center. Furthermore, students staying after school could go to their teachers for assistance instead of the writing center. While administrators, teachers, and students expressed excitement about the possibility of peer writing tutoring, this did not translate into tutoring sessions running at full capacity. The teacher leaders found it difficult to convince other colleagues that the writing center would be a valuable resource for students and would not require any extra work on their part. As the writing center emerged out of the English department, gaining teacher support across the curricular areas was more difficult.

The following year, the teacher leaders made some important adjustments that widened access to and strengthened the role of the EWC. First, the English department offered an Advanced Composition class, and scheduled it during lunch periods. This was important because it reduced the barriers to students using the center. Secondly, the course connected the work of the writing center to the formal school curriculum, so the needs of the writing center would be considered alongside the needs of other courses. The Advanced Composition course supported the development of students as peer reviewers, as it allowed for direct instruction in different genres of writing. Participating as a tutor in the writing center was now an option that all students could include in their own development as writers.

Most importantly, the students and teachers behind the EWC continued to engage and involve others. They reframed their work as a component of a wider

process of the school's support of writing across the curriculum. Teachers' understanding of the purpose and process of the Writing Center grew through student presentations to the Instructional Leadership Team and individual departments. As initial successful partnerships created evidence of success, the diversity of students and teachers accessing the EWC widened. Cross-curricular support and use of the EWC has grown over time due to increased accessibility and promotion. The teacher leaders have established a Writing Across the Curriculum site team consisting of members of each department to serve as liaison. This will create more shared ownership over the writing center by teachers of various content areas.

The EWC is now in its third year, and making significant headway in contributing to writing instruction outside the English department. In completing a research assignment on writing in a particular discipline, student tutors interview teachers in a content area. This year, teachers in 10 different content areas—including science, history, music, and PE—have utilized the support of student tutors for their assignments. A new program allows teachers to reserve trained EWC tutors to come to their classrooms to work one-on-one or in small focus groups with other students, or to give a mini-lesson or writing workshops on a writing-related topic. These adaptations are critical to gaining school-wide support and helping writing to penetrate the instructional culture of other disciplines. As the center ages, its survival will hinge on its ability to maintain connections with the teachers throughout the building. The personal connections will increase trust and risk-taking, and the professional exchange will share the power of writing—formal and informal—in students' learning process.

I am most excited about student-run writing centers because I think they can have a transformative effect in schools. Writing centers have the potential for changing writing in schools. By its very existence, a writing center provides a place where writing can be very visible in a school. A writing center can change the nature of student writing throughout the school. It may be too early to tell, yet I expect that the EWC will encourage its teachers to include more student writing among their performance tasks. A writing center

creates a place where stages of the writing process, such as drafting and revising, can be honored. The teachers at Edison did not want their center to be seen as a place for remediation but a forum for critical parts of the writing process.

A writing center can also change the role of students in the learning and writing processes. In a traditional classroom, students look to teachers for direction and next steps for their writing. A writing center prepares students to possess that authority as well as models collaboration in the learning process. In the role of peer reviewer, students must develop comfort in addressing the writing they might see in the writing of other students as well as the varying assignments of teachers. The conversations between student writers and their peer reviewers enable students to transfer understanding from one context to another and really make meaning of what they are learning by communicating it in writing—and through verbal dialogue. The Stanford Longitudinal Study of Writing found that students reported "dialogic interaction" impacted their writing growth more than any other factor.

From my perspective, the Edison Writing Center is a fascinating example of teacher leadership. A small group of teachers identified needs of their students and creatively explored solutions. They identified the many different stakeholders and sought to understand how they would be impacted by a student-run writing center. Amber and her colleagues developed a vision and presented it to others. As the Edison students and teachers adjusted to the presence of the writing center, the center and its leaders made changes to meet the school's needs. The writing center and its leaders welcomed input from others, and leadership became shared. School administrators are always on the lookout for developing teacher leadership in their schools. Fostering teacher leadership leads to greater leadership capacity, which often results in a school having greater ability to negotiate times and circumstances of change. The Edison teacher leaders have shared their experiences and expertise across Fairfax County and across the country. They make their work public for others to take it further than they could on their own. It reminds me of a vital truth about successful leadership: keeping others' focus on the cause always has to outweigh their focus on you being the leader.