

Writers Matter

at La Salle University

Fall 2015 Annual Newsletter

Letter from the Directors

Welcome to our Fall 2015 newsletter for the Writers Matter program. We are currently completing our tenth year of providing a unique and innovative opportunity for middle and lower high school students to learn critical writing skills through the use of journal writing as a vehicle for self-expression. Through writing about their lives, the students find an effective emotional outlet at a time in their lives when personal expression and having their voices heard is so important. Writers Matter is a motivational strategy that encourages students to share personal stories with each other, listen to other voices, and develop effective personal relationships with peers to provide more tolerance and appreciation of others.

The results of research conducted on the Program have consistently demonstrated that Writers Matter fosters more than just improved writing skill development among middle school students. These results include a more nurturing learning environment, stronger teacher-student relationships, and more effective classroom management because of the trusting and mutually respectful relationships that develop between teachers and students.

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STUDENT WRITING CONTEST

Each spring we host a Writers Matter Writing Contest to demonstrate how students have learned to use writing to express the things they care most about and help give them a “voice” with which they can discuss their own lives and the issues that are important to them.

The theme this year was, *Social Justice, equality, fairness and valuing diversity*. Students were asked to think about how they see their role in the fight for equality. Social justice can be defined in many ways, however, we can all agree the goal is to promote a just society allowing equality for all. It seeks fairness in the equitable treatment of all people including color of skin, religion, gender, sexuality and social class. The students were asked to draft a piece of writing that either related to a broader or global perspective including personal or community equalities, personal responsibilities and commitments and results of inaction to social justice issues or to more direct issues that relate to the realities of the students' daily lives. We opened the contest this year to both the middle school students as well as the elementary students. Samples of the students' work, as well as winning entries, are featured throughout this newsletter.



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SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST

- Teacher Testimonial
- Elementary and Middle School contest winners including Honorable Mention



LETTER FROM THE DIRECTORS CONTINUED FROM PAGE ONE

The Writers Matter Program was created in 2005 for middle school adolescent students, grades six through eight, in order to motivate and encourage them to become better writers. In 2008, *Voices of Teens: Writers Matter*, was published by the National Middle School Association. Since this publication, further analysis of the research data and contributions from our Writers Matter teachers contributed to many newly-tested teaching strategies and further understanding of theories related to the teaching of writing and student efficacy. These developments have led to a new book published by Temple University Press in January 2014,

by Drs. Yost, Vogel, and Lewinski called *Empowering Young Writers: The Writers Matter Approach*.

Since the inception of the Program, over 11,000 students have participated. We are extremely excited for this year for a number of reasons but most especially for the considerable increase in participants. After our pilot at the elementary level last year we have expanded the program to include 6 elementary schools bringing our total participants this year to 2045 students, 42 teachers, and 15 schools.

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“So many of the students felt comfortable writing about themselves and sharing what they had written with the class.” - A. Chorneiko

TEACHER TESTIMONIAL

“So many of the students felt comfortable writing about themselves and sharing what they had written with the class. Quite a few students felt the need to include their religious beliefs in their poems. If students in the audience asked questions, the presenting students answered them to the best of their abilities. In a public school, religion is a taboo topic, so it was nice to see that the students were able to discuss it freely. Writing with these themes was stress free and produced a high quality of reflective insight from the students.”

Allison Chorneiko, Lowell Elementary School, Grade 4

FIRST PLACE (MIDDLE SCHOOL)

Different I Might Be

(Wagner student – Todd)

Accept me for who I am

Different I might be,

But I assure you,

The same are we.

We breathe the same air,

Drink the same water,

And walk on the same land.

You treat me like trash.

But I assure you,

I am a person.

A person who deserves respect.

I cannot bleach my skin,

Nor change my descent.

I get treated like a wolf

Who has been rejected from the pack

For who he is.

Oppression will never stop me

For I will prevail.

My cry will ring in the south, north, west
and east.

Like a lion roaring in the rain.

We are equally created.

I cannot provide you with your wants and
needs,

But I ask you one favor...

Accept me for who I am.

Different I might be

But I assure you

The same are we.



SECOND PLACE (MIDDLE SCHOOL)

Inequality

(McDaniel student—*Cunningham*)

The world can be a cruel and dangerous place, especially in the streets of South Philadelphia. There are people out there, who don't deserve what happens to them, but unfortunately, some "insane" people do. I'll explain what happens in these dangerous streets.

In these streets, and even in the schools of South Philadelphia, the tough pick on the weak because it makes them feel as if they're in control, or like they're superior. People get bullied or jumped just about every day. It's even come to the point where students have to change schools, or even leave that part of the city! Our freedom and our normal lives have been taken from us, and people don't have the courage, or think they don't have the will to stand up for themselves and take charge.

There have been so many arrests over bullying and assault charges, that the city, and even the state has been taking the money that can be used to make the schools safer, and they are building countless prisons for these "wannabe" criminals. Our innocence is gone! Our freedom is gone! Even, our peace is gone! All of our peaceful lives are gone because we're the "weak" and they think they're more superior than we are. I think they try to take charge of us "weaklings" because they fear us. They know if one of us stands up, all of us will. And if we all stand up, we could win this war. The strong fear the weak, and if the weak become strong, the hunter will become the hunted.

That leads me into the question of the day, what is inequality? Inequality is a word that describes the world today. People think that no two people are equal. We could all be equal if we wanted to be, but as it turns out, we don't want to be, or at least "they" don't. The streets of South Philadelphia are like a food chain. The weak are the prey and the strong are the predators. We could flip this whole "food chain" upside down, or we could change the entire thing. What I mean is, that we could be equal. There would be no inequalities, but the freedom and the peace we need to get our lives back. The freedom and peace we need to have the nation we need. So why don't we just join each other, find solutions for all these problems, and do as Martin Luther King did and solve inequality nonviolently. All we need is peace and love. All I want for America is freedom. All I want is freedom, and peace. So let's stop being prey, stop being the weak, and stand up for us, stand up for America. This may just seem like an essay about inequality to you, but to me, this is a speech that I believe can change America for the better. I may just be a student, but I am also a student who has hope. I am a student with the hope to end inequality forever. I am a student with the hope to get our freedom, our peace, and our lives back. I hope these words get to your heart(s), to America's hearts, to the world's hearts. I hope that one day, inequality becomes a word that doesn't describe the world anymore. I want someone to hear these words, and if they don't hear it from me, they will hear them from the mouth, no, the heart, of someone with the same hopes as me. The weak needs to take charge and help life become peaceful, warless, and equal.

As I stated previously, I am from South Philadelphia, and this is my opportunity to stand up and be heard!

CONTEST WINNERS

Middle School

1st Place - Different I Might Be (Wagner-*Todd*)

2nd Place - Inequality (McDaniel-*Cunningham*)

3rd Place (two winners) - Hatred (Southwark-*Downs*)
Checkerboard – (Universal Institute Charter School - *Ms. Jean-Louis*)

HONORABLE MENTION

I Might Be Next (Wagner – *Todd*)

Far from Perfect. Far from fair. Close to a Disgrace (Harding—*Coughlin*)

We Want Justice (McDaniel- *Cunningham*)

No Reason (Universal Institute Charter School - *Ms. Jean-Louis*)

Social Justice (Wagner – *Clair*)

Segregation Now, Segregation Forever (Wagner -*Todd*)

CONTEST WINNERS

Elementary School

1st Place - *Anti-Bullying Project* (Lowell- Vanda and Shean) Group of students

2nd Place - *Gangs and Violence and Crime* both written by Christopher Williams (Lowell)

Third Place- Votership (Stanton) Group of students.

THIRD PLACE (Middle School) 1 of 2 winners

“Hatred”

(Southwark student—*Downs*)

The thing I hate about

THIS world is that

Hatred is everywhere.

Hatred can easily be seen

by the way people look
with their eyes.

Hatred is even in some people’s
blood like Adolf Hitler
or Osama Bin Laden.

Hatred is in the sound
of people’s voices or the
sound they make or
the face they make
when they look at you.

Hatred is everywhere!

Hatred can even be in
(love) disguise (love).

Some people who are
nice,
good,

friendly also have hatred
in their eyes.

It’s only because they are
wearing a disguise.

LETTERS FROM THE DIRECTORS CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

A Continued Focus on Professional Development and Growth:

As our professional community continues to grow we consistently reflect on our professional development model to meet the needs of all of our teachers. We are continuing our monthly meeting where the teachers share their student writing and a one-page analysis of the drafts with the other teachers in the program. Each piece of writing is followed by a group discussion where questions are asked and further analysis is provided. This form of professional development provides each teacher an opportunity to reflect on their current practices and learn about the methods of their colleagues. The teachers also present various classroom discoveries and lesson plans providing an optimal forum for meaningful and ongoing professional development.

As mentioned above, after such a successful pilot at Lowell Elementary School, we are welcoming 6 new elementary schools to the program. We are already seeing the positive results of getting students engaged in writing at an earlier age. With lessons learned from last year, we are implementing some adaptations to the middle school program to meet the needs of the elementary students. The larger group of collaboration for the Elementary Level students is sure to bring about more results and changes in implementation.

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WRITERS MATTER ABROAD

The Writers Matter Program continues to grow internationally. Writers Matter: Voices of Teens in the Middle East engages students in the region between the ages of 12–14 from ten schools in grades 6th–8th. It is comprised of Israeli Jewish and Israeli Arab students residing in Israel and Palestinians living in the Palestinian Territories.

This program has been designed and implemented by Dr. Vogel and Dr. Sami Adwan from Bethlehem University. We have partnered with Achva College, located in the northern Negev of Israel that serves many of the marginalized communities who are seeking higher levels of education. Students and faculty from Achva College have been receiving professional development by Drs. Vogel and Adwan to help them implement the Writer Matter program in both Jewish and Arab schools. The teaching manual that was written by Drs. Vogel and Adwan last summer has been updated this year providing lesson plans, examples of student work for practicing teachers. This publication provides a section about the teaching of writing for middle level students. Drs. Vogel and Adwan are currently completing a more comprehensive book that will be used by the teachers in the 2016–2017 school year. Visit this link to view Writers Matter in Israel: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AlefeCw1T-k>

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THIRD PLACE (MIDDLE SCHOOL) 2 OF 2 WINNERS

Checkerboard

(Universal Institute Charter School student - Ms. Jean-Louis)

I don't know why,
 why do they lie
 do they want to see me cry?
 It literally hurts
 to watch the news
 and be filled with a sensation of
 blues.
 Everyday I see
 Trayvon Martin and
 Mike Brown scenes.
 It seems to be a
 huge screen of black and white.
 We can't even checkerboard life,
 but why not?
 The white man thinks
 the black man's hand
 is full of sand.
 Rough and without value.
 Please just leave
 the black man be
 and let him free.
 Oh world,
 oh world,
 why can't we just
 work on making anew
 black and white tv.
 I love you dearly,
 but life can become
 quite dreary.
 I try to distract myself.
 I try to detract myself from the
 fact
 that everything is deteriorating.

I try not to hate cops,
 but some cops try so
 hard
 to stop the black man
 from achieving.
 Oh world,
 oh world, is a checker-
 board.
 Cops substitute and
 lock up
 the black man,
 but I don't understand
 why he has to put up
 his dark hands
 and face this inhumane
 wrath.....
 REST IN PEACE,
 a piece of me has become envious,
 green, the all white screen.
 I know that all cops are not evil,
 but the evil ones are creating that
 image
 one bad apple spoiling the rest.
 R.I.P
 The fact that a black man is
 screaming and is being beating on
 is horrible.
 Why do you choose to strike at
 him with such pride?
 Do you enjoy seeing life disap-
 pear?
 MLK had a dream.
 A black man would have as much
 of a chance as the white man to be
 S-O-M-E-B-O-D-Y.
 Somebody that doesn't die
 with their hands in the air
 knowing that they only
 have 5 seconds left of life
 and feeling the force of a police
 man's weapon.



1,2,3,4
 there are many more.
 For every number I've said
 there has been another death.
 I salute the people who have stood
 strong and have recognized the
 wrong
 People have rights,
 While others don't
 Theirs is taken away
 Don't let your mind trick you into
 thinking you have more power
 over someone.
 Rest in peace, Brandon Ta, Mike
 Brown, Yvette Smith... And rest in
 peace society.

WRITERS MATTER ABROAD CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

This year we have 10 participating schools, 15 teachers and approximately 700 students involved in Writers Matter. We are beginning to implement a pen pal program between the middle school students from both countries to allow them to share stories and hear each other's personal narratives. Additionally, we held a writing contest for the third straight year and awarded 10 prizes. We are looking forward to a great year and with the Middle East Writers Matter program.

One of our most exciting additions to the program this year was a parent/child component where we brought together children and parents to spend a day together. The participants were Israeli Jewish and Israeli Arabs from different towns and villages in Israel. It was our first attempt to provide opportunities for parents to share views of not just the challenges of living in Israel as either a Jew or Arab, but to discuss challenges of raising children in an environment of conflict. It was a remarkable day where parents and children found celebrated commonalities rather than differences. This program will be continued and expanded this coming year.



FIRST PLACE (ELEMENTARY SCHOOL)

"Second grade students wrote about the prompt, "How can we be "Fair" to everyone even if they're different"? After discussion they noted that bullying and hurting others was their primary concern and fear at school and playing. So we talked about how they could make that "better" and they decided that being friends with everyone was best. I asked how can you be friends with everyone and they decided, "If you want a friend, be a friend (to others)." Sounds like an advertising phrase but they actually came up with it themselves, just like all the hands together at the end of the video. Even after raising my own 3 kids I am often amazed at how creative even the youngest children can be...when given time, space and permission to risk, fail, and succeed."

M. Lisabeth Shean (Art at Lowell)



Lowell Elementary School
450 West Nedro,
Philadelphia, PA 19120
Principal David Lugo, dlugo@philasd.org
Ms. Vanda's Second grade class rm. 101
Ms. Shean Art rm. 108, mshean@philasd.org

 [Lowell Anti-Bullying Project Long Version.mp4](#)

AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAM

The after school portion of the Writers Matter program occurs every Tuesday and Thursday right at the end of the kids' school day. Because it is free from normative curriculum standards, the after school program gets to access youth in a deeper dimension than is often possible in the classroom. We talk about personal issues -- like constant change and the difficulties of adolescence -- and also sociocultural topics -- such as gender roles, the spectrum of color in communities, and also how media distorts reality. The kids are encouraged to express themselves about these issues with various mediums and prompts with the aim that, in doing so, they come to better understand themselves and how they fit into the future of the community. All of these topics are interconnected, and the process of expression assists in both expanding and fortifying the worldview of both mentor and student alike. In the process, we discover how similar we all are, despite what differences we conceive of ourselves to possess. This exchange forges a heightened sense of community in all of its participants, and we come to truly know each other as family. Such work is necessary for a brighter future to exist in our communities, and all should get involved. Come build with us!



LETTER FROM THE DIRECTORS CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

We are also very excited to welcome two teacher consultants we hired this year, Chris Linso and Lindsay Cicchino. These certified reading and writing specialists are visiting schools two days a week to help the teachers with planning and implementation of the program. They have the opportunity to participate with the students in the program and are an added support during their writing blocks. Chris and Lindsay will also assist with the after school programs.

Events and presentations:

On November 1, 2015, Writers Matter –A Documentary by Nitsan Tal, Filmmaker and Producer, will be released. The documentary features Wagner Middle School students and dedicated and passionate teaching staff as well as the many La Salle University undergraduate mentors who volunteered their time. This wonderful story will awaken viewers to the realities of public education in large city environments, the extraordinary challenges students face each day of their lives and the talent and potential these students possess – all told through personal stories and poetry.

Join us as we celebrate the lives of our youth and feel their hope for the future. Following the documentary you'll have the opportunity to meet many of the students, teachers and directors during the panel discussion and informal social hour.

Last November, Bob Vogel, Kimberly Lewinski, Erin Bloom and Youssef Kromah presented at the National Council for the Teacher of English in Washington, DC. Their presentation focused on the challenges urban children face each day. In a time where the value system of education is skewed toward testing and standardization many urban students don't stand a chance. They shared how writers matter has helped middle school teachers learn to help students write to learn about themselves and engage in curriculum. The title of the presentation was *Stories of Urban Students Change the Curriculum*.

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTORS CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

Writers Matter Mentorship Program and Campus Visits:

The Writers Matter program continues to provide La Salle University mentors to many of the participating schools. Once again, several of the middle schools involved in the program visited the La Salle University campus to gain a better understanding of college life in the hope of motivating the students to contemplate pursuing a college education as a future goal; if they work hard and do well in school. This visit included a tour of the campus, meeting with faculty and students, exploring the dormitories, participating in a writing activity and concluded with a poetry slam of selected students from each of the schools. Prizes were awarded to the top performers. It was a great day for all involved!

We are going into our fourth year with an after school program at Wagner Middle School. Mentors from La Salle University meet with the students twice a week for an afternoon of writing and support providing a safe space for these students to share their stories and find comfort from their peers. Due to the overwhelming success of this program, we are adding three new after school programs; one at Lowell Elementary School and the other two at Southwark and Roosevelt School. These afterschool programs are a collaboration of Lead teachers at each of the schools, the teacher consultant and La Salle University undergraduate students mentors.

Youssef Kromah and several members of the Youth Poetry Movement will continue to hold assemblies at each of the schools participating in the Writers Matter Program.

Special Thanks

Special thanks go to all the building Principals who have selected great teachers, Dr. Karen Kolsky, Assistant Superintendent, from the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) and to Dr. Penny Nixon Senior Executive Vice President of Education Universal Companies for their relentless support and encouragement for the Writers Matter Program.

This Program is generously supported by the following lead funders: PTS Foundation (Pam and Tony Schneider), Tyler Aaron Bookman Memorial Foundation (Jill and Neil Bookman); Jeff and Dana Berstein; Moses Feldman Family Foundation (Moe and Susan Feldman), McGladrey, LLP (Beryl Simonson – Coordinator) and Sari Feldman

A heartfelt thanks to these special individuals for their vision to help those less fortunate than themselves.

Thank You.

Bob Vogel

Founding Director,
Writers Matter Program at La Salle University

Professor, Department of Education, La Salle University &

Kimberly Lewinski

Associate Director for the Writers Matter Program at La Salle University

Assistant Professor, Department of Education, La Salle University



SECOND PLACE (ELEMENTARY SCHOOL)

Gangs and Violence

(Lowell student)

Gangs and violence have affected my family and me in a very close way. I have a very close family member who I love who was involved in gang violence and was a victim of gang violence. My uncle hurt people and then he was **SHOT** twice and almost killed by the same violence. My Uncle Antonio was always around wrong people. Some of his friends were gang-bangers. Because of whom he hung around, my Uncle Antonio was involved in a lot of fights. Last year my uncle was shot twice, a few months apart. I love my uncle and my uncle loves me. When he got shot and was in the hospital it worried the whole family and me.

Gangs and violence take so many lives, in many cities and the one I live in. In Philadelphia there were 248 murders in 2014, and 247 in 2013. Many of those murders were gang related. The 6th Street posse is one of the most vicious gangs in Philadelphia today.

I would like to make a difference by first controlling myself and staying away from violence and gangs. I will be a peaceful person and go to college to get my degree. I will then work in the community to stop gang violence. Gangs and violence have taken way too many lives. My slogan for my project will be "Use your brain, violence is insane."

My Uncle Antonio means a lot to my family and me. His life means a whole lot to me. When he got shot it made me look at the world in a different way. I started to feel bad about other people who may have lost family members to gang violence. It really makes me sad. I realized that I want to make a difference. Gangs and violence only hurt people. I want to help this world be a place of peace.

"I am often amazed at how creative even the youngest children can be...when given time, space and permission to risk, fail, and succeed." -M. Lisabeth Shean

THIRD PLACE (ELEMENTARY SCHOOL)

Votership

(Stanton—group of students)

In the 2014 electoral race between Tom Corbett and Tom Wolf in the state of Pennsylvania only 36.3 people voted. We think that's horrible. We came up with three ideas that we think will increase votership in our state. In the following essay we will present these ideas with supporting details.

To begin, we believe that votership can be increased through mobile voting trucks. Trucks would be equipped with voting machines. They would then travel to neighborhoods throughout all of Pennsylvania's 67 counties. We think the trucks should be red white and blue promoting patriotism. They could even blast patriotic music as they approach. If the people don't come to the polls let's bring the polls to them!

To continue, we also believe votership can be increased by reminding people to vote using graffiti artists. These especially talented artists will have a permit granting them permission to graffiti the word "VOTE"! on the sides of warehouses and abandoned buildings. They could create special uniform designs all over. We think that when people see these graffiti signs strategically placed everywhere that the message to vote will be on their brains. Imagine sitting in traffic and waiting for the light to change and noticing an amazing "Go Vote"! mural.

Furthermore, we believe that votership will increase tremendously if we use cereal boxes as spaces to remind people of the importance of voting. Did you know that there is a cereal box campaign that salutes American Farmers? The slogan is "Agriculture Works Here" It will feature 5 farmers and that will appear on cereal boxes bringing attention to the contributions that farmers and their families make to agriculture and America. We think that idea is cool. If we use cereal boxes, we can call attention to the importance of voting as part of the American life in addition kids could be involved too! Kids like prizes inside the box so why not include vote buttons and bracelets?

In conclusion, through our research we learned that in 22 countries they have compulsory voting. Compulsory voting is when people are obliged to vote. If an eligible voter does not vote he or she may be subject to punishments like community service or fines. We disagree! We strongly believe that voting is a right not a duty. We believe that this compulsory voting would infringe upon the rights of certain groups that are not political for religious reasons. We believe that our ideas presented in this essay; mobile voting trucks, the use of graffiti artists, and a cereal box ad campaigns will surely increase votership in the great state of Pennsylvania and promote liberty for all!

Fall 2015

CONTRIBUTIONS

Consider Giving to the Writers Matter Program

Please consider making a contribution to Writers Matter. Your contribution goes directly towards the purchase of books and writing materials for the students, as well as for afterschool programs.

If you are interested in participating in our adopt-a-school program, please contact Bob Vogel. All contributions are tax deductible and La Salle University meets all requirements for a 501C3 organization

Checks can be made out to La Salle University – Writers Matter and mailed to 1900 West Olney Avenue, Box 809 Philadelphia, Pa 19141. If you prefer to make a contribution on-line, please go to

<https://securelb.imodules.com/s/1206/index.aspx?sid=1206&gid=1&pgid=2660&cid=4565&dids=40>

PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS



Louis Wagner
J. Hampton Moore
The DePaul Catholic School
Seed School—Baltimore
Universal Charter Schools
James Logan
Lewis Cassity Academic Plus School
Delaplaine McDaniel
S. Weir Mitchell School
Southwark School
Edwin M. Stanton School
Lowell Elementary School
Roosevelt Elementary School
Leeds Middle School
Latin Middle School

Please visit our site: www.lasalle.edu/writersmatter

WRITERS MATTER DOCUMENTARY

The documentary features Wagner Middle School students and dedicated and passionate teaching staff as well as the many La Salle University undergraduate mentors who volunteered their time. This wonderful story will awaken viewers to the realities of public education in large city environments, the extraordinary challenges students face each day of their lives and the talent and potential these students possess – all told through personal stories and poetry.

Join us as we celebrate the lives of our youth and feel their hope for the future. Following the documentary you'll have the opportunity to meet many of the students, teachers and directors during the panel discussion and informal social hour.

WHEN: Sunday, Nov. 1, 2015

TIME 5-7 p.m. (a bye week for the Eagles)

WHERE La Salle University, Dan Rodden Theatre, Union Building

Parking is available on campus and at Central High School's upper parking lot.