

Writers Matter

at La Salle University

Fall 2014 Annual Newsletter

Letter from the Directors

Welcome to our Fall 2014 newsletter for the Writers Matter program. We are currently completing our ninth 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.

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 10,000 students have participated. We are extremely excited for this year for a number of reasons but most especially for the considerable increase in participants. This year over 2,000 students, 38 teachers, and 16 schools are involved in the Program.



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, *The Bell Has Rung: It's time to invest in US!* Students were asked to think about the many changes in education. Budgets have been cut, schools have closed, yet through it all we have dedicated teachers that never stop teaching and dedicated students that are fighting to be educated. The students were told to write to the city of Philadelphia to tell the citizens what they might not know about them. Students could share stories about what they learn in school, what it means to have a voice and how they can use their voice to make change, achieve goals and fulfill the dreams they have for the future. Additionally, they could consider how necessary support from the citizens of Philadelphia is needed to achieve these goals and what education means to them. Samples of their work, as well as winning entries, are featured throughout this newsletter.

Letter from the Directors

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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.

This year we are welcoming teachers at the Elementary level as a pilot for the potential of getting students engaged in writing at an earlier age. We look forward to working especially close with these teachers to generate a large amount of student writing so that further analysis can be done to discover the similarities and differences between our elementary and middle level student writers. Will new themes emerge? Which ones will remain the same? How do we create the same enthusiasm for writing with younger students? These and many more questions we will seek to answer this year; stay tuned.

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 three performers. It was a great day for all involved!

We are going into our third year with an after school program at Wagner Middle school. Mentors from La Salle University meet with the students weekly for an afternoon of writing and support providing a safe space for these students to share their stories and find comfort from their peers.



First Place (Wagner Student)

They (An Upside Down Poem)

*Read this poem from top to bottom first.
Then, read it from bottom to top.*

The bell has rung our lives are changing.
Keep the metal doors of education closed.
What they want do is,
Fund our schools.
They will continue to,
Ignore us.
They will not,
Make it better.
They will,
Profit for themselves.
They will never,
Improve our education.
They try to,
Ruin our lives.
They don't want to,
Give us an opportunity in education.
They want to,
Make their easy lives better for themselves.
They don't,
Acknowledge our thoughts.
They always,
Seem to care.
They really,
Step on our education unconsciously like
a piece of broken glass on the street
They'll never,
Think of the worst.
I'll never,
I say I'll never,
Give up.
"They" are the government.

Second Place (Wagner Student)

The Virus

You're feeling like education is gone too?
 I'm so used to disappointment, I just expect it.
 Feeling like the government doesn't give a crap about anything except for what's in their pockets.
 Hey friend, did you hear?
 But Philadelphia closed 23 schools,
 While building a \$400 million prison.
 Oh what fun.

Okay, okay, let's try again...
 We'll do a protest!
 Doesn't help anything...we're still in debt.
 We've only hit the monster in the nose,
 It's still standing.
 I'm confused and lost on what we can do to help...
 This is pestering and vile,
 I hope the government can hear me now...
 Yeah, 71128759 is shouting at 'cha!
 Live from Philadelphia, Pa!

I'd like to think of myself as normal,
 Just a female.

But our schools are legendary, fearsome!
 SO. .. ready to hear the confusing part?
 Why are they dying before I do?
 Oh God, I think I'll be sick,
 I think I have the 'Virus.'

Last month that same Commission followed up with a "doomsday" education budget...
 How funny...
 3,000 layoffs and the elimination of clubs,
 counselors,
 librarians,
 assistant principals,
 secretaries,
 athletics,
 art,
 music and more.
 Oh wow, anymore jokes?
 The government is as sweet as dirt.

It's not funny...and it really sucks.
 We're trying to save the schools but it's not working...
 You know what? I have three bucks in my bag,
 I bet the government wants it!
 Just take it!
 Like you took my schools,

My education,
 My 2nd grade teacher...
 Enjoy my agony.
 Like I said before,
 Just a female.

But you know what?
 I'm standing in school now,
 I'm happy for that.
 No money for schools, but millions for Prisons!
 Like a fist put to my chest,
 Like a mother kicking me out,
 I'm pouring out my soul.

So you listen hear Secretary,
 We may be down with our heads swung low...
 But we will stand and come back with a bang! Just wait for it...
 From your fellow foe,
 71128759,
 Who's still stuck with the 'Virus.'

So this poem helps me understand...
 That what I'm saying
 Must be going through people's head.
 For we have kicked the Monster in the stomach,
 Because children like me are sick.
 The 'Virus.'

Teacher Testimonial

"The WM program has helped my students in nearly every facet of their lives. Academically, the program excites them about writing and helps them find a personal link between writing assignments and their day-to-day lives. In becoming interested in the assignments provided, students become more vested overall in their classroom learning, especially in relation to writing."

Erin Bloom, 6th Grade teacher, Springfield Township Middle School



Third Place (Wagner Student)

The Bell Has Rung It is time to Invest in Us

I am tired of not getting the education I want
 Teachers can't teach if we keep having budgets cuts
 Students aren't learning very much
 Some can't even afford their lunch
 I am saying all these cuts are affecting us!
 Teachers spending their money on school supplies
 When it's not there responsibility it's you guys
 How are they going to help their family?
 If they are spending it all on paper and books
 That's not fair to them
 They are not even making enough
 Soon if you keep making these cuts
 There's going to be nothing left for us
 Philadelphia School District you are not helping
 We are not learning enough
 So stop making these cuts

Closing 40 schools is bad

Now classes are over crowded and kids are getting mad

I can barely focus with 30 in one class

But 40 its not going to last

Teachers quitting because too many kids are in 1 class

Students getting left back and that's sad

How are we going to get the proper education?

If we cant focus and not be disrupted

What about the support staff

They can't help 300 students by themselves

They need more help

How are we going to get in a good college?

If we are not getting the proper knowledge

I want to go to Dartmouth

But if this keeps happening I might end up seeing an

Fourth Place (Universal VARE Student)

It's Time For Us To Be Heard

Education is a very important matter.
 Year by year, we climb the education ladder.

Recently budgets have been cut, limiting our education.

We must do something about the situation.

It's time for us to be heard.

We, the students, have something to say.

It's going to be heard today.

The school system judges us too easily.

They think many things about us right away.

Many schools are being closed this way.

What I learned in school was to never give up on my dreams.

My dream for the school system is to have many schools open with outstanding scholars.

We can make this dream a reality, if we can show the system what we can do.

It's time for us to be heard, we can come through.



The student's original artwork is pictured above.

Third Place (Wagner Student)

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Ivy League college
 I want to be a lawyer when I grow up
 But if the government keeps destroying public
 schools
 I'm not going to see a case I might not lose
 Now you were probably like me when you were little
 With big dreams and the only way you can make it is
 getting thru school
 Now its time for me to accomplish getting thru school
 and living my dreams
 But I can't do it if you guys keep doing this to me
 I want to be a professional hockey player
 But cutting sports is not going to get me there
 We need our sports

That's what we look forward to
 Now you're telling us your cutting that to
 What more are you guys going to take
 You took our education, sports, music, arts, and
 much more
 Now what are we going to look for
 Imagine being us
 With nothing left and our dreams crushed
 Public schools are suffering too much
 We are not going to last
 Are you happy now you've taken all we had

Letter from the Directors

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Books, Events and Publications:

On October 27, 2014 @ 6:45 we will be hosting a special program celebrating the Writers Matter program at the Free Library of Philadelphia. The program will highlight some incredible voices and dueling narratives of middle school students living in Philadelphia, Israel and the Palestinian territories. You'll have the opportunity to meet students from the Philadelphia program as well as some of the university mentors. Video interviews of Israeli and Palestinian middle school students will be presented as well.

Over the summer, Erin Bloom, a 6th grade teacher and member of Writers Matter for 6 years, and Bob Vogel self-published a second volume of *Voices of Teens* including various lessons and activities that can be adapted for our younger students starting the program.

In May 2014, Kimberly Lewinski presented at the International Reading Association in New Orleans, LA discussing how the Writers Matter teachers use technology and multi-literacies to engage their students in writing. The presentation was titled, *Preschool to Pre-Service: Successfully Using Technology to Support Multiliterate Readers and Writers Across All Ages*.

In November 2014, Bob Vogel, Kimberly Lewinski, Erin Bloom and Youssef Kromah will present at the National Council for the Teacher of English in Washington, DC. Their presentation will focus 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 will share 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 is *Stories of Urban Students Change the Curriculum*.

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.

Writers Matter Abroad: *The Writers Matter Program in the Middle East*



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 twelve 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 Adwan to help them implement the Writer Matter program in both Jewish and Arab schools. This past summer a teaching manual was written by Drs. Vogel and Adwan that provides lesson plans, examples of student work and a specific section about the teaching of writing for middle level students

This year we have 12 participating schools, 15 teachers and over 800 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.



Writers Matter mentorings program at Wagner Middle School

Every Tuesday and Thursday, La Salle University students participate in a mentoring program with students at Wagner Middle School. La Salle students participate in this program in two ways. They either volunteer or are mentoring as part of a service learning experience.

The program is mutually beneficial to both La Salle and Wagner students. The older students are able to form close relationships with younger students who may have drastically different lifestyles. The Wagner students are able to have their feelings validated and their passions fostered.

The after school program features a variety of activities for the students, including writing letters, working collaboratively on poems, and examining the meaning in song lyrics.

Throughout the school year, the students complete activities that build up the level of trust in the group. Friendships are formed and creativity flourishes. It is a unique experience for college students, as they are able to participate in a mentoring program that consists of more than simply tutoring.

Honorable Mention

BUDGET CUTS

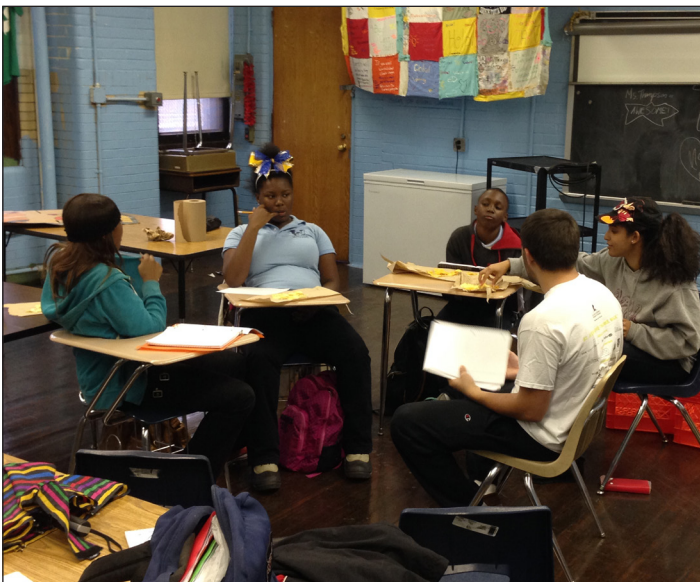
IT'S TIME WE STOPPED WAITING FOR THE
ADULTS AND STOOD UP FOR OUR
EDUCATION
WE'RE SICK OF JUST WAITING.
YOU KEEP SHUTTING DOWN OUR
SCHOOLS
AND TREATING OUR TEACHERS LIKE
FOOLS.
TEACHERS PAYING FOR THEIR OWN
SUPPLIES
JUST TO KEEP OUR SCHOOLS ALIVE.
FAMILIES FORCED TO MOVE
WHEN NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS SHUT
DOWN, THEY HAVE NO CHOICE.
THE SAFETY OF THEIR CHILDREN GETTING
TO SCHOOL COMES FIRST.
IT'S UNFAIR FOR EDUCATION TO BE A
STRUGGLE.
EDUCATION IS SUPPOSED TO BE THE
ANSWER TO OUR TROUBLES.
YET YOU WANT TO MAKE EDUCATION
DIFFICULT FOR INNER CITY YOUTHS.

WHY DON'T YOU JUST TELL THE PUBLIC
YOU DON'T CARE ABOUT US?
TELL THE TRUTH!!!
CRAZY HALLWAYS AND CLASS SIZES TOO
BIG!
WHAT'S YOUR ANSWER?
CUTTING JOBS, SUPPLIES, AND
EVERYTHING
DOES THIS MAKE SENSE?
MAYBE IF YOU'RE THINKING ABOUT
BUILDING MORE PRISONS!
PEOPLE LOSING THEIR EDUCATION IS LIKE
DYING FROM STARVATION!
STOP BEING GREEDY AND HELP US SAVE
OUR EDUCATION!
KARMA MIGHT REACH YOUR GRANDKIDS
GENERATION!
YOU SAY FAILURE IS A BAD THING?
YET YOU ARE SETTING US UP FOR
FAILURE!
THANK YOU!
7TH GRADE PHILADELPHIA STUDENTS

They Don't Really Care (A Rap)

Take my education away
By making money for yourself everyday
I hate it because my books are outdated
Screaming to be updated, re-integrated
How long do we have to wait to see what's

happening is a mistake
Look around: my neighborhood is poverty
stricken
It would help if the politicians would just listen
But these dudes close schools and build homes
for themselves
They make rules to make rules for their own
wealth
It's HD clear to me:
They don't really care for me
But they care about themselves, turning
Our schools into pre-jails,
Holding cells
It's like we're in our ancestors' shoes
Running away from our oppressors
I can't keep up with all these stressors
In this generation, they make us look like fools
Perpetuating it all by closing our schools
So that when we write our letters from deep in
our cells
We won't even be able to S-P-E-L-L.



Honorable Mention

Defundelphia

Kids Shooting Kids because They Don't Have Any
Basketball Teams
Kids Thrown Bullets At Each other Because There's
Not Any Football Teams
Without any teams teens turn into fiends
Kids smoking dope
Because Philadelphia's society doesn't have any
hope
It's dirty in these streets
The streets need some soap
Philly schools eating jail food in school
The Government putting tax on everything
How will kids buy supplies for school?
All Philly schools closing where are all the youth
going to go?
Its seems like the government just want to see us die
slow
Life is hard for a young black man
People just don't understand
Judges stretching people time like a rubber band

In these streets you can't worry about no other man
Now they making new jails
So people can be stuck in a box like new mail
With no bail
They just put cuffs on our ankles & wrist
Then say (oh well)
Now there are fewer teachers
To many people on one team
So there more people on the sideline
Kids shooting every day
And I'm not talking about with a foul line
There are no activities for kids to do after school
So the youth hang around and act like fools
There's nothing to do
So teens try to smoke away the stress
Its really making things worst but they believe it's
for the best
Philly streets need more jobs & peace
More jobs & activities
Will lead to less rest in peace



Ask Me: How Are Our Schools?

Ask me:
How are our schools?
I reply:
Too many students and not enough teachers
Laid off, broken, and on the unemployment lines
Too many suspensions and not enough leaders
With all of these budget cuts, how will we learn?
Our education is like a piece of chewing gum for
politicians
They chew it up and spit it on the ground when the
flavor runs out.

Knowledge is power and power strength
Not strength of body but strength of mind
We write the politicians, but they don't reply.
Have you read the headlines?
We're millions of dollars behind.
Still, our schools doors are sealed tight
Like a box marked "fragile"
They're taped up and shipped off
Contents broken
And the look of despair on the kid's face
When it opens.

Third Place (Wagner Student)



Stop

- Stop
- Stop pulling more and more of our teachers
- Stop
- Stop giving charter schools our money
- Stop
- Stop sinking spears into our learning
- Stop

- Stop
- Stop making us take three buses just to get to school
- Stop
- Stop waiting for our classrooms to explode before you take more kids out
- Stop
- Stop joking around with our children.
- Stop

- Stop

- Stop acting like those charter schools are on a pedastool
- Stop
- Stop pretending like you don't see us
- Stop
- We are here!!

- Bang! That was the sound of you shooting our Philly schools down.
- Stop
- Stop taking out more of our activities.
- Stop
- Stop not caring about us
- Stop
- Stop pretending everything is okay
- Stop
- Stop taking away the money that we need for important things
- Stop...
- Please, stop.

Imagine if...

- Imagine if we had enough money for what we need.
- Imagine if we no longer needed to plead.
- Imagine if we had books so we can read.
- Imagine if we were all able to succeed.
- Imagine if you stopped wasting money on making a jail.
- Imagine if all students would be able to pass and

- not fail.
- Imagine if teachers weren't fired every other week.
- Imagine if all of us students and teachers were able to speak.
- Imagine if you were able to stand up and change this mess.
- Imagine if this was all over so you can finally get the chance to take a rest.

Honorable Mention

Student No. 7213175

What am I?

According to the school district I am

Student No.723175

Name: Quadir Wiley

You give me a number to replace my name?

I'm not a score in your little game

But according to you I am

You gave me a number but took my books

Dirty crooks...

No wonder we give you dirty looks

No books? How do you expect me to learn?

You're just a bunch of stupid dirty lil worms

You take our money to make more jails

Obviously you don't care...it's not fair

You lay off our teachers, packed 33 of us in one
room

You treat us like dirt between the dustpan and
broom

We don't have enough supplies

We're forced to share books

Because you dirty crooks wanted to take so you
TOOK

Now take a look, you wonder so many kids get
booked

But you're the reason why!

You take away our education, then we dropout

Bad things=all we think about

From our heads we can't get it out

So I'll ask again, what am I?

Am I 7213175 or Quadir Wiley?

Can I have my books back, maybe my teachers?

Better yet my name?...dirty crooks

Now give back what you took!

– Student No.7213175



Letter from the Directors

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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 PTS Foundation (Pam and Tony Schneider), Tyler Aaron Bookman Memorial Foundation (Jill and Neil Bookman); Moses Feldman Family Foundation (Moe and Susan Feldman), The Stuart Piltch Family Limited Partnership (Sari Feldman) and McGladrey, LLP (Beryl Simonson – Coordinator).

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

Thank You.

Bob Vogel
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