

Research Brief High School Writing Centers

Question: What needs to be considered when establishing a writing center?

Summary of Findings:

Writing labs have a long history on college campuses, the main purpose of which is to assist students to become better writers. Although the information on writing centers at the high school level is at best, limited, the literature reported that the number of students using writing labs increased each year in use. According to the research in this area, successful writing labs at high schools strive to strengthen the students' writing and the school's academic program by:

- helping students become better writers in every content area
- offering one on one guidance so that regardless of the students' writing level, they will become stronger writers
- listening to students read, explore and talk about their work
- providing remediation, reinforcement and enrichment in all aspects of writing (Childers, P., Fels, D., & Jordan, J. 2004, Fall; Gaskins, J. 2006; Gehrman, K.S. & Upton, J. 1990, April; Mueller, G. 2006).

Considerations

When determining if your school will benefit from opening a writing center, there are many issues and questions that must be explored and answered.

- What are the goals of the center? How will it benefit the students?
The literature strongly suggested that it be for writers of all ability levels, not just for students that need remediation.
- How will the writing center be funded?
Funding for furniture, technology, printers, physical space, duplicating costs, training of tutors, staff development and personnel coverage are the major considerations.
- How will the center be staffed?
It was highly recommended that a teacher be in charge of the writing lab. He/She should know the writing process, how to critique and provide feedback to students on their writing ,and how to help students improve reading and writing skills. They should also help teachers better understand the connection between students' thinking and the writing process. There needs to be someone who will provide the direction and leadership, do the public relations, recruit the tutors, supply the training, make the schedules and be a tutor regularly. Some suggestions were to have a teacher assigned full time, to provide release time for one to two periods, assign teachers as part of their workload to cover the center,

- use retired teachers, college professors, college students, and recruit student mentors.*
- Will students be used as peer tutors?
Peer tutors tend to be the norm. Students' volunteer or apply to be a tutor. The qualities sought in a tutor are that they are excellent listeners, liked and respected by the other students, responsible, and decent writers that want to get better. The role of peer tutor might be part of an English course and part of the coordinator's class load.
 - When will the center be open?
The literature recommended that the writing lab definitely be open 30 minutes before and after school. Some centers were open during the school day and others for limited hours during the school day.
 - Where will the center be housed?
It is important for the lab to be in a place that is easy to access, homey, comfortable and safe.
 - Will the writing center be supported by the administration, faculty, staff, students and parents?
Getting buy-in from all stakeholders, including them in its development and continuing to keep them informed, is important for the success of a writing lab.

(Carpenter, R. 2008, Fall; Childers, P., Fels, D., & Jordan, J. 2004, Fall; Feltenberger, A. 2008, Spring; Gehrman, K.S. & Upton, J. 1990, April; Kent, R. 2006; Silva, P. 2004, Fall)

Suggested Support Activities of a Writing Center

- Introduce ninth grade students to the center and have teachers require them to go to the center for particular assistance and support.
- Work with teachers across the curriculum and know the required assignments so that sessions can be set up to support students on specific assignments.
- Schedule mini-workshops on topics such as writing in a particular genre, how to take essay exams, study skills, note-taking skills and research processes.
- Present in classrooms to support the writing in a given course.
- Provide special tutoring for assistance with college essays and applications.
- Make audio recordings (iPods were suggested for doing this) of stories, books and writings for elementary and middle schools and nursing homes.
- Have open houses and invite students, staff, parents and community members.

(Boquet, E., Bowen, B. A., Frosa, C., Hagan, D., and McCall, M. A. 2008, Fall; Carpenter, R. 2008, Fall; Childers, P., Fels, D., & Jordan, J. 2004, Fall; Gehrman, K.S. & Upton, J. 1990, April; Inman, J. A. 1997)

Online Resources:

- Boquet, E., Bowen, B. A., Frosa, C., Hagan, D., and McCall, M. A. (2008, Fall). *Record and reflect: iPod use in writing center staff development*. Retrieved online <http://projects.uwc.utexas.edu/praxis/?q=node/242>
A succinct description on ways in which iPods can be used to assist both the tutor and tutee is explained.
- Carpenter, R. (2008, Fall). *Consultations without bodies: Technology, virtual space, and the writing center*. Retrieved online from <http://projects.uwc.utexas.edu/praxis/?q=node/235>
The crux of this piece deals with the importance of creating a space that reaches out and supports students, even if it is a virtual setting.
- Childers, P., Fels, D., and Jordan, J. (2004, Fall). *The secondary school writing center: A place to build confident, competent writers*. Retrieved online <http://projects.uwc.utexas.edu/praxis/?q=node/91>
The authors have all begun and led writing centers in high schools. This piece describes the important tenants of a writing center.
- Feltenberger, A. (2008, Spring). *Opening to the door to discourse: Cooperation, authority, and the inner-city high school writing center*. Retrieved online <http://projects.uwc.utexas.edu/praxis/?q=node/203>
The experience of a young teacher in the inner-city of New York in establishing a writing center is described in this article.
- Gaskins, J. (2006). *Comparing the idea with the reality of a writing center*. Retrieved online <http://writinglabnewsletter.org/archives/v30/30.10.pdf>
Although this article describes experiences in a college writing center, it provides strong feedback from their tutors, which include germane issues to consider when working in any writing center.
- Gehrman, K.S. and Upton, J. (1990, April). *Beyond tutoring: Expanding the definition and services of the high school writing center*. Retrieved online <http://www.writinglabnewsletter.com/archives/v14/14-8.pdf>
Although an older article, it provided numerous activities that can help make a high school writing center a success.
- Inman, J. A. (1997). *Within and without*. Retrieved online <http://www.writinglabnewsletter.com/archives/v21/21-5.pdf>

This piece cites many outstanding activities that have been done in high school writing centers.

- Kania, S. (2005). *In program at high school tutors lend a hand to peers*. Retrieved online
http://www.hartfordinfo.org/issues/documents/education/htfd_courant_032605.asp
The perspective of a high school student and the writing center is described in this piece.
- Kent, R. (2006). *Creating student-staffed writing centers: Grades 6-12*. Retrieved online from <http://projects.uwc.utexas.edu/praxis/?q=node/121>
The components that need to be considered when developing a writing lab are shared in this article.
- Kolba, E. and Crowell, S. (2010, April). *Coming of Age: The thirteenth year of the writers room program*. Retrieved online
http://www.writersroomprogram.org/coming_of_age.htm
The journey of two teachers that established writers rooms in their school district is described in this piece.
- Mueller, G. (2006). *A call to action: Embracing the need for high school writing centers*. Retrieved online <http://writinglabnewsletter.org/archives/v30/30.10.pdf>
The author was a tutor in a college writing center. This article is written from the perspective of one who supported high schools opening writing centers, which in the long run would help students when they get to college.
- National Council of Teachers of English. (n.d.). *The NCTE definition of 21st century literacies*. Retrieved online
<http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/21stcentdefinition>
This is a very brief list of the expected literacies for the 21st century.
- Resources Specifically Targeted to K-12 Writing Centers. Retrieved online
<http://secondarywritingcenters.wikispaces.com/file/view/2008SecondaryBiblio.pdf>
This is a large reference list on writing centers.
- Scimone, A. (2009, Spring). *Conference and collaboration: Writing centers in high school English composition classes*. Retrieved online
<http://projects.uwc.utexas.edu/praxis/?q=node/265>
A description of ways in which a high school writing center can support composition courses is given in this piece.

- Silva, P. (2004, Fall). *Launching a high school writing center*. Retrieved online <http://projects.uwc.utexas.edu/praxis/?q=node/40>
This article describes the experience of developing a high school writing center.
- St. Johns University. (2008). *First student staffed high school writing center in Brooklyn established from St. Johns/Nazareth High School collaboration*. Retrieved online http://www.stjohns.edu/academics/pr_aca_080612.news_item@digest.stjohns.edu%2facademics%2fpr_aca_080612.xml?context_date=4/10/2010
This piece discusses the experience of working with students in a writing center.
- VerBrugge, M. (2004). *Arrowhead High School. Writing lab statistics*. Retrieved online http://my.hsj.org/schools/newspaper/tabid/100/view/frontpage/schoolid/148/articleid/26922/writing_lab_statistics.aspx
A concise piece that appears to have been written by a student, describes how the school's writing lab is utilized.

Examples of high schools with writing centers

- Brewer High School. ME
<http://www.brewerhs.org/activities/writing-center/>
- Mercy High School. Burlingame, CA.
<http://www.mercyhsb.com/page.cfm?p=71>
- Montclair Public Schools. New Jersey. Edgemont School
<http://www.montclair.k12.nj.us/WebPage.aspx?Id=1203>
- Mt. Lebanon School District. Pittsburgh, PA.
http://www.mtlsd.org/Jefferson_Middle/writinglab.asp
- Souhegan High School. Amhurst, NH
http://www.sprise.com/shs/writing_center.aspx?id=1694

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