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Opening the Door to Discourse: Cooperation, Authority, and the Inner-City High School Writing Center

[Spring 2008 / Training](#)

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Making high school writing centers a reality



Alaina Feltenberger

Journals like *Praxis* repeatedly demonstrate that writing centers are constructive spaces where students can receive individualized support and guidance throughout the writing process. Increasingly, universities across the nation are establishing and funding their own writing centers, which serve thousands of students each year. Writing center consultants and coordinators have largely stopped struggling against academic bias that viewed writing center work as somehow “illegitimate,” focusing instead on theory and discussions of praxis. However, of the literature devoted to writing centers, very little deals with existing or potential writing centers at the secondary level, especially in urban schools. Therefore, I hope to not only share my practitioner research as an inner-city high school writing center coordinator, I also hope to open the door to a discussion of the complexities surrounding secondary-level writing centers in public schools.

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I taught for two years in the New York City public school system through the [NYC Teaching Fellows Program](#), and during that time I saw both the rise

and fall of our high school Student Writing Center (SWC). As a young English teacher, I shared the same frustration that Richard Kent describes in "Creating Student-Staffed Writing Centers, Grades 6-12": like Kent, I was shocked by my students' poor writing and grammar skills but was too constrained by prescribed curricula and classroom overcrowding to provide much one-on-one help. Like Kent, I decided that if students could not get individualized writing support from their teacher, they should at least be able to go to a school writing center to get the help they so desperately needed. I believed that if I procured the means and made a "pitch" to my principal, I would eventually gain the administrative support I needed to start up a writing center. I wrote a grant proposal to [DonorsChoose.org](https://www.donorschoose.org) to obtain materials, announced my intentions at faculty meetings, and talked to students in honors English classes. However, it was only once I had both received my grant in late September and volunteered to serve as writing center coordinator that a small, unused classroom was set aside for my transformation. Suddenly, the "Student Writing Center" appeared on all of the school's promotional literature, was announced at PTA meetings, and became a focus of the region administrator's next visit; yet, no other faculty or staff members were assigned to help run the SWC. I was the only volunteer.

In fact, the greatest support for the SWC came from the students. Nearly a dozen honors students volunteered to give up their lunches and study hall periods to staff the SWC, and I held several workshops after school to train them as tutors. Together, we read all of Jeff Brooks' "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work" out loud and held an open group discussion about what the goals of writing tutoring should be. I was astounded by how quickly these students grasped the value of such tutoring tactics as reading aloud and mirroring body language. We did several role-play activities and collectively engaged in trouble-shooting potential consultation problems. What I found most interesting was both how cooperative and how patient these tutors became—they truly believed in the SWC's mission of creating better writers, not better papers. Curiously, many of these tutors were below grade-level despite their honors placement, and many had problems with their own writing—yet they were successful tutors in that they were good listeners for their peers, could ask thoughtful questions on expanding ideas, and knew how to look up information in the writing manuals. This group of tutors consisted of eleventh and twelfth grade students who were eager to gain experience that would set them apart should they apply to college. They bought into the idea of process writing, and although I would often answer specific writing questions during my prep periods, the SWC team believed, as I did, that they had valuable skills to offer. Their confidence in their fledgling roles allowed them to be successful with their younger cohorts, and word of the SWC spread slowly through the school. The tutors even created fliers to advertise the SWC to their 800+ peers in a way that would connect with their interests (a picture of the rapper Tupac: "Where would I be without my words?" hovering over the SWC's hours and room location). In the first few weeks, as I ironed out details such as scheduling appointments and SWC supervision (finally, a school security guard was assigned to watch the room), my tutors experienced their first consultations, and I began to hope that our small success would inspire the faculty and administration to provide more support.

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normalize such concepts as writing across the curriculum.

Unfortunately, just as the SWC began to have a noticeable impact on our school's culture, the administration killed the program. After 16 weeks, students were scheduling visits with some consistency, and I was excited to document repeat clients, until one February morning, I came in to find several boxes containing the SWC materials sitting outside my classroom door. I was furious, but the only explanation I received was that the space was needed for classes. My tutors were crushed—some of them even continued to hold tutoring sessions on their own in the cafeteria. Although the administration's decision was a sad blow to my students and me, the SWC's demise spoke to the unfortunate material reality of an under-funded, over-crowded inner-city school. Overworked teachers and limited resources are the well-known educational reality in urban environments. Yet the SWC's short life also revealed another reality: that peer-to-peer interactions are possible and successful in such environments as a means to help address the writing deficiency endemic in the education gap. The question, then, is how to make these realities coexist: how can a school with limited resources establish a sustainable writing center?

In order to answer this question, we must examine the feasible necessary conditions for positive cultures of collaborative learning. Writing centers are established within the university, but have not yet attained a widespread presence on the secondary level for a variety of complex reasons. Public school systems must deal with many contending interests within the hierarchy of administration, and therefore changes to funding allocation and programming would require a widespread "buy-in" to the benefits of the writing center. Of course, careful budgeting and space management could ease some of the material strain on the school, but education of the administration and faculty as to the positive effects of writing center tutorials would provide the necessary incentive for such changes. I am suggesting that the education gap exists not only for our students but for educators as well—an undue division between praxis and the educational services valued at the college level versus those at the secondary level. Rather than devoting occasional journal articles to bemoaning the language skills of incoming college freshmen, academics should devote more attention to writing preparation in high school and the potential ways of promoting such improvements. Writing centers in high schools would therefore benefit universities: students would be more prepared coming to college, and the writing center would already be a normalized feature of their education, remaining a resource they would continue to use. What better way to support struggling students than to provide access to nearly a decade of writing tutorial availability?

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Once established, a secondary-level writing center would require very little maintenance to ensure its sustainability if the workload were distributed evenly throughout the entire faculty. If the writing center coordinator taught fewer classes than other staff, and if other staff members rotated time supervising the space, a writing center could become a reality in even the most frugal of schools. The only requirement would be a shared enthusiasm for the writing center's potential, for as Jake Gaskins put it, "successful tutorials depend, not

only on the skill and training of the tutor, not only on the attitude and engagement of the student, but also on the collaboration of faculty who share our goals" (15). Such cooperation between teachers and administration would not only promote a healthy school culture, but would also help to normalize such concepts as writing across the curriculum. Students are an essential part of the picture, but schools will always have students. I was lucky to have such an intrinsically motivated group of tutors. Other schools might find it necessary to create incentives such as awarding class credit or hours towards a volunteer or honors organization to initially entice students to become tutors. However, from my own experience, I believe that students will willingly participate in writing center work as long as the school has supportive and passionate adults who believe in the writing center and its goals. Once a school's administration and faculty are on board, the goal will be to create a sense that "going to the writing center is just what we do—it's just how we write."

The question then becomes one of how to create such an unprecedented "buy-in" among secondary-level educators. One option becomes clear: the rhetoric of the writing center must break out of university discourse in order to gain wider cultural recognition. As Greg Mueller suggests in his "Call to Action": "Highly dedicated and motivated individuals in our writing center community need to step up and accept the challenge of filling the void in secondary schools across the United States" (11). In addition to change instigated by members of the writing center community, I believe that the discussion must also include current members of the secondary education community: administrators, faculty, parents, and students. Small successes with secondary-level writing centers must be celebrated, discussed and modeled—building the normative authority to establish writing centers in high schools across the nation. Although the initial success of my school's SWC was not ultimately sustainable, I hope that wider dissemination of such stories will create a culture of writing center praxis that includes high schools by default, not by exception.

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