

**Written Testimony of Sharon J. Washington, Executive Director,  
National Writing Project**

*Submitted to the Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies of the U.S. House Committee on Appropriations for Testimony on May 12, 2010.*

I am Dr. Sharon J. Washington, the executive director of the National Writing Project (NWP). Since 1991, the National Writing Project has been an authorized program within the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Title II, Part C, Subpart 2). With consistent federal funding, the NWP has built a national infrastructure that provides professional development for teachers in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. NWP accomplishes this through a network of more than 200 linked project sites located in colleges and universities across the country. NWP sites are dedicated to providing the highest quality professional development in writing for teachers across all disciplines and at all grade levels.

I appreciate the opportunity to present this testimony requesting continued support for the National Writing Project. As you know, the Department of Education's (ED) proposed FY2011 budget includes no direct funding for NWP. Rather, it proposes to create a competitive grants program for states called Effective Teaching and Learning: Literacy. NWP would not be eligible to compete for funds in this program and would receive no direct funding. As a result, this effective national infrastructure that Congress has supported since 1991 would be lost. FY 2010 funding for NWP is \$25.65 million.

The National Writing Project addresses two essential elements in educational improvement: the importance of quality teaching and the vital skill of writing.

**The impact of NWP professional development on teachers and their students**

Numerous studies have pointed to the importance of quality teaching in student achievement. At the heart of the NWP model is the idea that effective and accomplished teachers can be leaders, and that they are pivotal to making positive changes in both teaching and in student achievement. The good news is that NWP has evidence of a positive impact on teacher practice and on student achievement. Independent surveys of 22,287 teachers, conducted over a seven-year period, indicate that teachers participating in NWP professional development endorse it as the best professional growth experience that they have had and they adopt practices that research has shown to improve student achievement in writing.

The NWP has also assembled a growing body of evidence derived from a national program of rigorous, independently-reviewed, quasi-experimental studies. In 16 different studies conducted between 2004 and 2010, researchers measured the extent to which students of teachers who received training by an NWP local site improved their writing skills. The studies were conducted in diverse settings representing all geographic regions of the country. Each study employed direct and independent assessments of student writing, and included carefully matched comparison classes or students.

## **Written Testimony of Sharon J. Washington, Executive Director, National Writing Project**

A team of external evaluators reviewed all of the research proposals for technical rigor. A panel of independent experts in writing assessment designed and oversaw the national scoring of student writing. In this independent scoring of student writing, NWP students' improvement outpaced that of students in closely matched comparison groups on overall writing performance in every one of the 16 studies. In one-half of these studies, the greater gains in Writing Project teachers' classrooms were so large as to be statistically significant.

In 2007, NWP contracted with SRI International to serve as an independent external evaluator for a five-year national randomized control study of the impact on writing instruction and writing performance of local Writing Project partnership activities with schools. The study focuses on teachers and students in seventh and eighth grades, although the entire school may participate in partnership activities. The study sample is comprised of 40 schools in diverse geographic regions throughout the country and data are being collected on a wide-range of teacher practices as well as student writing performance, including pre- and post-timed writing assessments. Results will be published in 2012.

The National Writing Project has also been shown to contribute to teacher retention—an important additional benefit of federal support for NWP. The NWP Legacy Study (NWP, 2007), which documented the careers of 2,114 teachers who participated in NWP Invitational Summer Institutes, found that 70% of NWP teachers remain in the classroom throughout their careers and 98% stay in education until they retire—and these teachers can be counted amongst the strongest and most accomplished who are serving in our nation's schools. This provides outstanding news in an era when many teachers leave the profession in their first five years. Additionally, the study found that Invitational Summer Institute participants serve an average of 22.7 years in education—more than 50% longer than teachers in general.

### **The importance of writing as a vital skill for all students**

The NWP is the only federally funded professional development network that addresses writing at all grade levels and across all disciplines. Writing is a skill that is key to college and career readiness as well as to the practice of citizenship in a democracy. It is central across subject areas, as important to science and technology as it is to the humanities and vocational education. Today, as states and districts consider common standards for writing, the NWP stands ready to provide the professional development to teachers the country as a whole will need.

Direct federal funding of NWP ensures the availability of local partners who can work with locally defined, appropriate, and effective programs for educational improvement. It is an investment that leverages university, local, state, and private dollars to improve classroom instruction in writing that reaches millions of students at all grade levels annually. Direct funding is the spine on which these local investments are leveraged. The federal investment is matched one-to-one by these other investments.

NWP's national infrastructure provides a platform for innovation, as well as accountability, quality control, research, and the dissemination of promising and innovative teaching practices on a national scale. NWP programs include, for example, support for teachers across a variety of content areas to improve students' reading and writing for academic purposes, special programs

## **Written Testimony of Sharon J. Washington, Executive Director, National Writing Project**

for beginning teachers, and support for teachers using new digital tools in teaching writing. Through the NWP, tens of thousands of teachers are prepared to serve as a professional development resource to their colleagues and local schools. Total attendance at NWP local professional development programs is more than 130,000 educators each year.

Without federal support, NWP—the only national, federally funded program to focus on writing—would cease to exist. Local sites rely on federal support to maintain and grow local programs to meet local needs. Without federal support, most writing project sites would close, and therefore be unable to provide professional development to teachers in their states. The impact of the federal investment that has allowed the growth of the national network since 1991 would be lost.

### **The view from the classroom**

The depth and breadth of the NWP have important implications for teachers. Northern Virginia Writing Project teacher, Mary Tedrow, explains the impact of NWP professional development on her growth as an English teacher and as a leader of other teachers. She is currently a high school teacher at John Handley High School in Winchester, Virginia, and the director of the Northern Virginia Writing Project Shenandoah Valley Invitational Summer Institute.

“I became a teacher in 1978 and my initial contact with the work of the National Writing Project came in 1982 through a course featuring presentations by classroom teachers trained through the Northern Virginia Writing Project, located at George Mason University. In an era when teachers worked in isolation, this was the first time teachers shared their best lessons and the work of their students with me. This initial contact resulted in immediate changes to my practice, including the inclusion of daily writing and student sharing, all unheard of in traditional classrooms. “

“I continued to seek out professional development opportunities offered by the Northern Virginia Writing Project until 1998, when I applied for and was accepted into the Writing Project’s five-week Invitational Summer Institute. I have been exposed to more than 21 years of professional development programs and the Writing Project stands alone in its transformative nature and longitudinal network of support.”

“The chief change in my instruction as an English teacher was a shift from assigning writing to teaching writing. All of my students consider themselves writers because they write daily and accept writing as a tool for thinking, reflection, and self-expression. Each year students are required to develop writing for a wider, public audience, bringing relevance and purpose to their writing. Many of these writings have been published in mainstream media, including national publications. Students have won scholarships, prizes, other tangible awards, or simply received a written response to inquiry. All these writing successes lead to confidence and further success. But their initial confidence begins with sharing with peers in the classroom. At one point in my career, five former students were simultaneously working on collegiate publications at the University of Virginia, Virginia Tech, Mary Washington, and Bridgewater College. Many of my former students are now earning their living as writers.”

**Written Testimony of Sharon J. Washington, Executive Director,  
National Writing Project**

“In addition, the Writing Project taught me how to carry the lessons forward by modeling collegial sharing. I have been able to extend what I have learned to fellow teachers, serving as a resource to those in my school building and beyond. I have shared my own best practices in numerous settings, reaching hundreds of teachers in ten surrounding districts. By directing the satellite site for the Shenandoah Valley, I identify potential teacher leaders and shepherd them through their own presentation development, an inquiry process that deepens and extends teacher confidence and pedagogy. Over fifty teachers in grades K-University have received training in the Shenandoah Valley since 2005 and returned to their respective districts to lead their peers in professional development while continuing to learn new skills from the NWP network. Our teachers have developed and presented day-long programs for districts and a local university. In addition, our teachers share their classroom observations and resources through articles in education journals as well as our own publication, *The Journal of the Virginia Writing Project*.”

“I’ve worked with students in grades 9, 10, 11, and 12 and at all ability levels, self-contained special education to Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses with our local community college—always using Writing Project-acquired skills with every student to great success in both motivating and engaging students so that real progress is made.”

“I credit the training received in the Writing Project for my students’ success and my ability to return to the classroom each year ready to work for improved literacy for all. I am still in the classroom because the NWP provides the resources, the network, and the energy to continually problem-solve for my diverse student population so I can provide them with relevant, meaningful writing and thinking experiences.”

The NWP makes an invaluable contribution to the country by working with teachers like Mary Tedrow so that they can prepare their students to be successful academically and in their chosen career paths. It also supports them as professional development leaders with their colleagues. Writing Project teacher-leaders design and deliver high-quality programs that have been demonstrated by research to be effective.

As the NWP executive director, I passionately support these efforts, and I urge Congress to continue its important investment in a program of national merit that has the potential to benefit all of America’s school children. A 2009 national public opinion survey revealed that writing is a priority for most of the American public. Three-quarters of those surveyed believe there is a greater need now to be able to write well than there was 20 years ago. Those of us who have children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews do not need to be convinced on that score. We also know how important it is for the new generation of students to be able to communicate effectively and how important it will be to their future. We urge Congress not to allow the federal government’s only investment in this critical skill to be lost in preparing all young people for that future. The National Writing Project provides high-quality, large-scale, and cost-effective professional development programs for teachers so that our nation’s students will be accomplished writers and learners, as well as effective and engaged citizens in our democracy.