

Testimony of Barbara Simons Smith, Western Reserve Middle School, Berlin Center, Ohio

I have been a teacher for over thirty years. I stepped in front of my first class of students in 1967, and since then, I have taught nearly two thousand children. During the five decades in which I have taught, I have engaged in a wide variety of professional development programs. I consider this to be an important part of my role as a teacher.

My professional development experience spans my career from my first year of teaching to the present. I have participated in more than one hundred professional development activities, including university sponsored workshops, national conventions, regional seminars, scholarly presentations, teacher study groups, and two days of teacher inservice training provided by my local board of education each school year. It is from this wealth of professional experience and time spent in the trenches of my classroom that I speak to you today. I am here to tell you that, from among all of the professional development programs in which I have participated during my teaching career, the National Writing Project has been the most beneficial.

My association with the National Writing Project began during the summer of 2000, when I attended the Invitational Summer Institute of the National Writing Project at Kent State University. During this five-week session I was exposed to a very different type of teacher education, one where good teachers from across Northeast Ohio taught other good teachers the very best things they knew about teaching. For eight hours each day, and often long into the evenings by choice, we worked together to understand deeply what it takes to be effective in the classroom. We identified barriers to our own learning, and then we broke those barriers to merge into a cohesive, caring learning community. We discovered the value of the support our colleagues offered. The directors of the institute wove throughout the sessions a strong program of theory, academic reading, and analysis of research. We worked to design and produce standards-based lessons that reflected the best practices identified in today's reading and writing research. We became readers and writers and researchers of our own teaching practice.

For the past 28 years, I have been a language arts teacher in a small, rural, under-funded school district in Northeast Ohio. Before my experience with the National Writing Project, I taught my students well. They composed perfunctory five-paragraph essays, read with understanding the assigned "typical" texts, and performed at an "effective" level on our state mandated reading and writing proficiency tests. In our close-knit rural community, where citizens place great value on hard work, straightforward truth, and mastery of basic skills, I was considered to be a good teacher.

But, the straightforward truth of the matter is, the teaching I was doing then does not match the quality of the teaching I do today. The increased quality in my teaching is reflected in the scores my students receive on our state mandated writing tests. Before my affiliation with the National Writing Project, my students had a very high passage rate on the proficiency test, but very few students received scores in the advanced range. In fact, for the first six years of the test's existence, only three students received advanced scores. Since my attendance at the Summer Institute of the National Writing Project at Kent State University, the percentage of

students in my classes who received advanced scores on their writing proficiency test has risen each year, from 31 percent in 2001, to 35 percent in 2002, to 44 percent in 2003.

But, in the spirit of straightforward truth, it must be said that the impact the National Writing Project has had in my classroom goes far beyond proficiency test scores. Indeed, it goes far beyond the walls of my classroom. My continuing involvement with the National Writing Project, the link to research, theory, and best practice it provides to me, and the network of respectful, knowledgeable colleagues who are always available, have helped me find ways to bring meaning to the writing and reading and thinking of the students in my school and beyond. Through a minigrant from the NWP at Kent State University, for the past two years, I have been able to offer a day of School and Community Writing, called "Write Here; Write Now" in which my colleagues from urban, rural, and suburban schools in our region come for the day to teach workshop sessions attended by students and community members from Berlin Center, my rural town. This annual event, now sponsored by our PTA, brings the parents and school board members of our community into our school, engaging them in the act of writing poetry and essays with our children. The impact on our students when their parents experience their learning directly in these writing classes has been very positive. With my improved understanding of how writing is learned and how it can be used to learn in other subjects, and with the support of our parents and community members, my students are moving far beyond the basic five paragraph writing that was done in my classroom five years ago. Students now reach deep within their heads and their hearts to use language to its fullest. They discover the power of words. I carefully develop sound, creative ways to help them master the necessary academic content standards. The high levels of confidence and enthusiasm our students show as they approach academic tasks reflect the spirit and philosophy of the National Writing Project. In this small, country school, the mastery of reading, and writing, and speaking of all students at all levels of academic attainment demonstrates the positive impact the National Writing Project has had beyond my classroom walls.