

Testimony of Richard Sterling, Executive Director, National Writing Project

Good morning. Thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of my National Writing Project (NWP) colleagues across the country. In the writing project, we say that “writing matters” because writing is crucial to a student’s success in school and later in the workplace and community. Every student in America deserves and needs a highly skilled teacher of writing.

Certainly these teachers are to be found in classrooms around the country, particularly teachers who have participated in writing project programs. But we also know, most recently from a report by the National Commission on Writing, established by the College Board, that writing is too often neglected, that teachers are too often uncomfortable and untrained in the teaching of writing. We also know that teachers too often leave teaching because they lack the very professional resources and support that would ensure success for their students and themselves.

The National Writing Project is the major effort in the country to improve writing. Currently, there are 185 local writing project sites, located in universities in 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Each of these sites conducts an annual summer institute, attended by experienced teachers in the area. Together, these teachers prepare for leadership roles by demonstrating their most effective practices, studying research, and writing themselves. They also join a network of peers who continue to meet together, to learn and solve problems and improve their teaching.

After the institute, writing project teachers conduct programs in their own schools and in neighboring schools and districts. The programs are similar in their purposes to the institutes. They develop knowledge and skills. They develop local leadership. They put that knowledge and leadership to work to improve student achievement. Collectively, sites of the NWP conducted 6,482 programs in 2003. Over 100,000 teachers attended those programs.

The effectiveness of this combination—summer institute and school-year inservice—is validated by research from independent evaluators. Studies of student achievement—both local and national—show positive results. Student writing improves in the classrooms of writing project teachers. Research also shows that teachers change their classroom practices as a result of their participation in the program.

The National Writing Project is cost-effective. Historically, the project augments its federal funding by raising an average of \$21.1 million in local funds. Our fiscal year 2004 federal appropriation is \$17.89 million. We are now seeking an increase to \$30 million. This increase will allow the NWP to have a much wider impact on writing and education than it does at present.

The goal of the National Writing Project is to have a site within reach of every teacher in America; to give every teacher access to high quality professional development; to

involve new universities across the country in partnering with local schools to improve writing; to create satellite sites that would serve hard-to-reach areas of our country.

The National Writing Project knows how to grow strong, effective sites. The site in Logan County, West Virginia, for example, began six years ago as a satellite of the Marshall University Writing Project in Huntington, some four hours away. Local teachers flocked to the programs because for the first time, those programs were offered right in their neighborhood. The schools, in the meantime, marked the improvement of their students following the opening of the satellite site. The number of Logan County students receiving top scores on the West Virginia state writing assessment more than tripled—from 30 students in 1998 to 99 students in 2003.

This is the power of putting a professional community within a reasonable distance of teachers. An increase in the writing project budget will mean more local sites and satellite sites. It will also mean more services to teachers and schools. Specifically, the National Writing Project plans to expand its programs for new teachers. Many programs for new teachers focus on classroom management. The writing project focuses on instruction and on closing the achievement gap between students who are capable writers and readers and those who are not.

An increase in funding will mean more programs for teachers of all disciplines, including history, science, mathematics, and teachers of English language learners. Bringing this kind of work to scale means a sustained effort and commitment to writing as a central focus for all students.

An increase in funding will mean more emphasis on technology. Learning to write in a digital world is an area of professional development that sorely needs attention.

The promise of the National Writing Project is to bring the power of writing to all teachers and students in America. We appreciate your long time support of the National Writing Project and ask for that support to continue so the project can move toward our important new goals.