

# A WISE Writing Program

**“W**hen students receive feedback that is accurate, specific, and timely, the impact on achievement is so great that it is more significant than the socioeconomic status of children,” writes Douglas Reeves in an article in the July 2010 *American School Board Journal*. As the principal of a Title I school, I find that statement to be powerful.

In discussing Reeves’ article with colleagues, I wondered how I could provide more valuable feedback, particularly to my school’s special education students. These students were often reluctant writers, and I hoped that giving them more feedback would motivate them to write.

Acting on the glimmer of an idea, I approached our district’s writing coordinator, who is also a high school English teacher. Since our district has implemented a one-to-one laptop initiative, in which each high school student has his or her own computer and email account, I wanted to explore the possibility of matching elementary grade special education students with high school writing mentors. Serendipitously, the writing coordinator also sponsored the National Honor Society at the high school, and her senior members needed to participate in a service learning project during the upcoming year. So began the Westside Insider Story Exchange (WISE) project.

## Project Development

Our simple idea paired elementary students with high school writing mentors. The third- through sixth-grade students receiving special education support in my building would send creative writing pieces by email to the high schoolers on a bi-weekly basis. Using readily available technology, their mentors would email back, offering suggestions and providing positive, prompt feedback (our expectation was that mentors would respond within two days). These electronic friendships bestowed our special education students with a special status among their peers, and I saw the

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potential for the high school students to be powerful role models.

I wrote and submitted a Serve Nebraska mini-grant application, which provided \$500 to throw kick-off and end-of-the-year celebrations so that our mentors and mentees could have some face-to-face time, with refreshments. It also permitted us to purchase some small incentives (such as paperback books, writing journals, and “Good News” postcards) to encourage the elementary students to stick with their writing throughout the year.

Before we started, my high school colleague and I held a training session for the high school mentors. They practiced giving appropriate feedback, using writing samples from elementary students. We encouraged them to look beyond obvious and sometimes troubling errors to the ideas embedded in the writing. We asked them to be genuine, friendly, and motivational in their responses.

An ice cream social kicked off the project and introduced mentors and mentees. Since the project was known by the WISE acronym, the Westside High School students started calling themselves “WISE guys.” The excited students traded photos and school addresses.

By October, the electronic exchanges began. The mentors made com-

ments in the margins, using simple, encouraging language to ensure that their mentees understood. In addition to making technical suggestions, mentors built relationships with the elementary students by sharing common experiences that came out in the writing pieces. As a result, our reluctant writers were excited to complete writing assignments and email them to their mentors, and the responses were eagerly awaited. The writers saw revising and editing, steps that had been dreaded in the past, as time well spent because their mentors said they were eager to see the next drafts.

## Enhanced Writing Skills

Throughout the year, the writing exchange continued. Mentors and mentees shared interests in sports, pets, and family life. The high school students got the knack of choosing one type of error (such as verb agreement) rather than marking every single mistake. They showed our students how to use onomatopoeia to involve the reader’s senses; how to add details that contribute to the beginning, middle, and end of stories; and how to pay careful attention to general mechanics, such as capitalization and punctuation, so the reader is not distracted by them. The elementary students were anxious to do their best work because they cared about the opinions of their new audience in a way they had never experienced before. They had new friends who cared about them as individuals, as well as their writing.

At the closing celebration in May, participants exchanged heartfelt farewells. Both sets of students felt that they had benefited from the project, and teachers indicated that the feedback had indeed enhanced the writing skills of our elementary special education students. As a result, this school year we have a new set of WISE guys submitting and critiquing writing samples as the elementary students continue to sharpen their writing skills. 

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