



Five-Point Bulletin

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North Star of Texas Writing Project

Inside this issue:

To My Immigrant Students With Love	1
A Response to the Siren's Call	2
"Finding True North" in Gainesville	3
Write-Alouds to Model the Writing Process	3
Why We Must Resist the Teaching Over	4
Publication Information	6



Points of the Star

- ◆ Inquiry
- ◆ Dialogue
- ◆ Authenticity
- ◆ Modeling
- ◆ Re-visioning

To My Immigrant Students, With Love

by Holly Genova

Students,

Over the past two days, I have listened to your stories about your journey to America. Many of you faced hardships that I could never imagine; your tenacity inspires me on a daily basis to work harder and to be grateful for all that I have in life. Some of you left behind your parents, while others are meeting their parents for the first time, as a teenager. Some of you leave school and go to work in order to help your families pay bills, all while keeping up with your studies and learning a new language. While others leave school and take care of your younger sibling because your parents are working two or three jobs. I heard stories about your parents and how they want a better future for you. In fact, that was the one thing that all of you had in common, despite where you are from: ALL of your parents want a better future for

you. But, I also fought back tears as you talked about the fear your parents have for your future. I listened as you described escaping violence, religious persecution, and walking across deserts. I am inspired by your dreams of becoming doctors, lawyers, radio host, fashion designers, working for the United Nations, and joining the military to fight for your new country, America. I laughed with you as you described your brothers and sisters, or told your classmates not to say your sister is pretty. Thank you students for sharing and trusting me with your stories.

You are the reason I teach. You are the future. One day, your story will inspire the next generation of immigrants that they too will have a better future in America.

Let us help you teach writing.

www.northstartexaswritingproject.org

Contact Us!

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Follow us on Twitter: @NorthStarTxWP

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For newsletter entries, comments, or questions, please contact Amber Counts, newsletter editor, at ambercounts@gmail.com. Entries for the next edition are due by May 31st, 2017.

A Response to the Siren's Call

By Alexandra Babino, Ph.D.

It's okay to want to quit. It's okay. There is so much more being asked of us than ever before.

The standards, the amount of standardized tests, our students and community's needs continue to grow while supports like commiserate pay, enough time in the day, and professional respect feel lacking. I know how all of these weights can burden us until we find ourselves at the brink of a professional standstill. I also know how they represent the tip of the iceberg in complexities facing contemporary educators. These weights make the siren's call for an easier life all that more appealing. And while so temporarily alluring, these sirens are an allusion; they're a lie, because nothing compares to the priceless impact you have on our students and communities.

So I say, it's okay to want to quit, but I implore you to routinely remember the passionate ideals that called you to education in the

first place. Remember your burning desire for justice. Remember the joy of sharing the love of your content and the hope that is written in your students' faces. Remember to ask with deep conviction: if I don't serve them then who will? Remember your vision of a future that is better because of your daily service of bringing your whole self to your students and campus.

Then, after you remember why you fight this good fight, I encourage you do whatever it takes to keep your fire of inspiration lit.

Spend time in the morning reflecting on your values. Rally with other like-minded and hearted educators. Take your lunch break. Leave early when you have to. Even take a personal day or a vacation away. It's okay to want to quit, but I beseech you to do whatever it takes to keep going with joyful hope. In other words, I charge you to maintain a spirit of "patient impatience", coined by educational

giant Paolo Friere.

Keep being impatient with the all-out wrongs and the almost-but-not-yets. Patiently persevere until the "wrongs" become right and the "almosts" become complete. Keep being impatient with the status quo for our kids, with legislation and greater systems that are not yet ideal. Be impatient for this better world in your mind's eye, but patiently live out your impatience over time. Then, one by one, each day, week, month and year watch as the victories start to accumulate. You will see your principles become a reality. You will see your love and unabashed joy ripple out through this generation, in ways you can only begin to imagine. You will see true equity, true democratic education and will be so very glad you did whatever you could so you didn't have to quit. As you are patiently impatient, we will all be better for it.

EDUCATION EITHER FUNCTIONS AS AN INSTRUMENT WHICH IS USED TO FACILITATE THE INTEGRATION OF THE YOUNGER GENERATION INTO THE LOGIC OF THE PRESENT SYSTEM AND BRING ABOUT CONFORMITY OR IT BECOMES THE PRACTICE OF FREEDOM, THE MEANS BY WHICH MEN AND WOMEN DEAL CRITICALLY AND CREATIVELY WITH REALITY AND DISCOVER HOW TO PARTICIPATE IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF THEIR WORLD.

—PAULO FREIRE, *PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED*

I cannot be a
teacher without
exposing who I
am.

Paulo Freire

“Finding True North” in Gainesville

By Rhonda Lemieux

On Saturday, February 25th, seven of NSTWP’s TCs went to Gainesville Junior High School to offer 7th grade students an opportunity to delve into exploring how writing can change who they see themselves as a writer, as well as what they thought they couldn’t do.

“I know I don’t model enough,” said one Gainesville teacher when asked one thing she learned about the demonstrations that she would take back to her classroom on Monday. My heart sung a song of happiness when Monday morning came around and there she was, modeling her writing for her students. She was opening herself up in front of a group of 7th graders. From that modeling and Saturday, those students finally began to look at writing as an opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas.

“I just want to stay in here for a few more minutes to

finish this final copy. Is that okay?” asked a student who only a few hours earlier regarded himself in his “I Am” poem as someone who wasn’t school smart. This young man after only being in the “True North” framework and around NSTWP TCs for only a few hours realized he did have something to say, and he could when given the freedom to write his thoughts and ideas.

Almost 6 months ago, I visited Gainesville Junior High for the first time. I left this challenging school with a heart full of “want” to help them feel success, help give students confidence, love and compassion for education. Today, I am fortunate enough to work here. I know we can help guide these students to a world of confidence and allow the teachers to know the “Finding True North” pedagogy.



Write-Alouds to Model the Writing Process

From Readwritethink.org

Model your own writing of a short text, generally choosing one particular aspect of a genre to write-aloud (such as an opening or closing paragraph of a longer essay or a dialogue between characters).

- Plan write-aloud lessons for types of writing that present particular challenges to your students. Prepare for the lesson by writing your own short texts and developing awareness of your own decision-making while you write.
- Tell students that you will be verbalizing your own thinking for them as you write. Ask students to pay attention to the decisions you make as you write, and remind them that they will be producing this same type of text themselves.
- Explain to students what kind of text you will be writing and what you want to accomplish as you write this text. If you are writing a persuasive essay, for example, remind students very briefly that you will need to convince readers of your own point of view. For narrative dialogue, point out that characters’ talk should explain the main problem of the story.
- As you write (using chart paper or document viewer), make verbal statements that describe your own decision-making processes:
- Now I need to summarize my main points. I think I should look back at my outline of points that I made in the rest of the essay.
- Hmm, what can I have this character say now in order to show how upset she is?
- How can I spell this word? It will help if I say the word slowly to myself first.
- After you have completed the write-aloud for a short text, ask students to comment on what they noticed about your thinking during the activity. You may want to ask students to talk about what seemed to be most important to accomplish as you were writing. You might also ask students to describe what you were thinking about as you wrote a challenging part of the writing.
- It may also be useful to ask students to talk about their own thinking and decision-making used while they are writing this same kind of text or to work with a partner to write their own example.

Why We Must Resist the Teaching Over Testing Act

by Stefanie Garcia and Sarah Underbrink

Check out their podcasts at realintervention.blogspot.com

As public school teachers who are apparently on the “wrong side” of the accountability movement at this time, we are challenged quite a bit. Standardized tests are unfair and biased. Standardized tests only test a student’s ability to guess. Standardized tests are inauthentic experience that aren’t a judge of anything other than themselves. And after all - “Don’t you think that every student is an individual, and every kid has strengths, and every kid can learn...Don’t you want to teach them and not teach a test?”

Yes, of course. No one wants to spend their lives wasting their time teaching students things that don’t matter.

Hence the impact of politically charged legislation like [The Teaching Over Testing Act](#) – which aims to reduce the accountability piece of the STAAR performance system.

But standardized testing and standardized measures of accountability are not incompatible with teaching, individuality, or strengths finding in students. The trouble with the reinforcing this idea of teaching OVER testing is the polarization of those two concepts. Rhetoric would have you believe that to do one, you must not do the other. But actual educational research says that the two work in tandem. To understand what your kids know, you assess. Then, you plan instruction. Then you assess to see if your plan provided good instruction. Then you

plan again. That is what good teaching looks like. It is targeted, precise, and purposeful.

And you know what? Some of our colleagues have this figured out.

Standardized tests, like the STAAR, reveal deep demographic biases, right? The test could really just be an income test right?

It’s funny isn’t it? In the high-performing schools – let’s call it like it is, the wealthier schools - in the wealthier schools the teachers there are SOMEHOW managing to provide high quality education, valuable life skills, educational content AND those students are still somehow passing standardized tests. Right? No one’s arguing that the 1% are just teaching to the test, agreed?

There is a reality in education. That reality is that our vulnerable student populations are underperforming their privileged peers in higher education. The demographic lines that we see our standardized tests follow are rooted – not in the invalidity of the tests – but in THIS reality. The privileges that the wealthy classes enjoy day-in and day-out are heightened by the preparation of the academic institutions for the rigors of higher education – which include high performance on standardized exams such as the GRE, the MCAT, the LSAT, and so on.

So we must concur with former Secretary of Education Dr. Rod Paige when he said bills like the Teaching Over Testing Act are “a loss for Texas children but a win for those dodging accountability”.

If we in public education remove accountability measures such as the STAAR, if we remove our incentive to train our students how to use their knowledge on “inauthentic” standardized test, do you think the “high performing” students will stop preparing for the SAT? Do you think they will no longer pay thousands of dollars for College Boards preparation programs? No, they will not. Because they understand that not only must you learn, but you must be able to demonstrate that learning in the way our society requires.

“not only must you learn, but you must be able to demonstrate that learning in the way our society requires.”

Is the true purpose of the Teaching over Testing Act to hide the gross systemic inequity that we’ve exposed here? This Act wants public schools to “choose their own systems of accountability”. Great, let’s send Texas education into the wonderful world of *Who’s Line is it Anyway?* where everything is made up and the points don’t matter.

But education DOES matter. The decisions that educators make – whether they be well-meaning or

Why We Must Resist the Teaching Over Testing Act (continued)

negligent, benign or maleficent, intentional or not – ricochet through the rest of a person’s life, often changing that course forever. And accountability measures – particularly those in the lower grades – are absolutely crucial.

Stefanie – our resident English expert – is a smart, capable woman who is a product of the Texas public school system under the far less rigorous TAAS framework. She tells a story that is, let’s face it, not an unusual one in public education.

“We have to face adversity, not run from it. When we are challenged, we rise.”

Once, I had a love for math as a child, and always did well in the subject, until geometry, when a teacher decided he did not want to teach anymore. No one was watching, so our tests were handed out, and he called out answers. It was understood that we should make sure to copy a question or two wrong here and there. The rest of the time, he read the newspaper and we hung out. There was no standardized test to show that this teacher’s students had no idea what an equilateral triangle was. By looking at our grades, this teacher looked like a boss!

Later, I couldn’t do Algebra 2. I chose to not take Trig because math was suddenly “too hard”. I went to UNT, which required un-

dergrads to take pre-cal, and I took it four times without ever passing. I ended up going to another college with a less stringent math requirement. This string of failures all stem from one teacher with no accountability, and literally changed the trajectory of my life.

And make no mistake - our society requires accountability. Parents want to teach their kids to be accountable for their mistakes. Doctors must be accountable for hurting their patient through negligence. Politicians should be accountable to their constituents. But somehow education is this golden calf that we cannot touch with accountability but must simply worship.

But don’t worry. There are those of us who will look at the painful truth – that decades after Brown v Board of Education public schools are still not providing equal outcomes for their students. We will be brave enough to look at the data from the tests, accept that this data means we have work left to do, and try to figure out how to do it. There are those of us who

will fight for equity in public education.

We have to face adversity, not run from it. When we are challenged, we rise.

Texas needs accountability. We have huge problems facing us as a state, and we need the best, most highly educated group of kids in order to help solve them. This is not a sweet platitude, I know. This is not popular, I know. But change starts with us, today, demanding that we know the truths of our schools, and that instead of hiding it, or trying to destroy public education with vouchers, we need to fund our schools that take ALL students and hold them to high standards of excellence that we know every school and every student can achieve.

For podcasts by Sarah Underlink and Stefanie Garcia, check out:
realintervention.blogspot.com



Accountability is essential to personal growth, as well as team growth. How can you improve if you're never wrong? If you don't admit a mistake and take responsibility for it, you're bound to make the same one again.

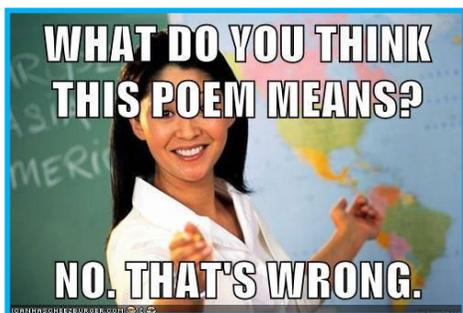
— Pat Summitt —

AZ QUOTES



North Star knows that amazing moments are happening in classrooms across the Metroplex, and we encourage you to publish – not only in our NSTWP newsletter, but to a wider audience as well. Here are some links to publications that will help you share your expertise with the world!

NCTE Journals; see www.ncte.org	
<i>English Journal</i>	http://www.ncte.org/journals/ej/calls
<i>Language Arts</i>	http://www.ncte.org/journals/la/call
<i>Voices from the Middle</i>	http://www.ncte.org/journals/vm/call
International Literacy Association	
<i>Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy</i>	http://qap2.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1002/(ISSN)1936-2706/homepage/ForAuthors.html
<i>The Reading Teacher</i>	http://www.reading.org/general/publications/journals/RT.aspx
Texas Journals	
TCTELA (Texas NCTE Affiliate) - <i>English in Texas</i>	http://www.tctela.org/english-in-texas/
TALE (Texas IRA Affiliate) – <i>Texas Journal for Literacy Education</i>	http://www.texasreaders.org/journal.html



Sage on a Stage vs. Facilitator of Learning

As I began teaching a new group of students mid-January, I noticed that when we read a short work together—especially a poem—they tried to wait out my questions until the point where I would simply tell them what it meant, but this isn't how my classroom works. They learn little about how to think critically or retain knowledge if we simply tell them what texts mean instead of guiding them as they find meaning on their own or via collaboration with peers. I know it is difficult for some to give up their position as the all-knowing master, but our kids will "get it" if we set up the conditions for them to do so, and they'll appreciate the confidence they gain in the process. Teach them to take risks and to back up claims with evidence. That's a skill that more adults need to master.

~Amber Counts

Hello, educators and colleagues! Special thanks to all of our newsletter contributors for this issue. We all have interesting stories, reflections on teaching experiences or strategies, creative writing pieces, lesson plan ideas, or upcoming opportunities to share. If you would like to have a piece published in the next newsletter, please send it in according to the schedule listed below. I am looking for anything that will help your fellow educators or inspire them in some way. Let's make this a great resource for our writing and teaching community!

Send entries to: ambercounts@gmail.com

Submissions due: by February 28th, May 31st, August 31st, and November 30th

Corresponding Publication dates: *On or around:* March 5th, June 5th, September 5th and December 5th