

Impact of the National Writing Project's College-Ready Writers Program on Teachers and Students

SRI's 2-year random assignment evaluation found consistent program implementation and positive impacts of the National Writing Project's College-Ready Writers Program (CRWP). Despite the challenge of implementing a program in 22 districts across 10 states delivered by 12 Writing Project sites, CRWP was implemented with a high degree of fidelity to key program components. Teachers in CRWP districts took up the materials and approaches presented by the program, and as a result the writing instruction that students experienced in treatment districts was significantly different from that in control districts. Ultimately, CRWP had a positive, statistically significant effect on the four attributes of student argument writing—content, structure, stance, and conventions—measured by the National Writing Project's Analytic Writing Continuum for Source-Based Argument. In particular, CRWP students demonstrated greater proficiency in the quality of reasoning and use of evidence in their writing.

Writing is an essential skill in modern American society. It is crucial to careers and civic engagement. Yet U.S. students' writing falls far short of national expectations.^{1,2,3} States have adopted new standards to increase the chances that students will graduate from high school prepared for college and careers, but most students are not yet receiving instruction that is aligned with those standards.⁴

In this context, the National Writing Project won an Investing in Innovation grant in 2012 to provide professional development for secondary teachers in high-poverty rural school districts in 10 states (Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, New York, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Tennessee). The National Writing Project designed the professional development to improve teachers' ability to teach to college- and career-ready writing standards, with a specific emphasis on improving students' skill in writing arguments based on nonfiction texts.

Commissioned to do an independent evaluation, SRI International found that the National Writing Project's College-Ready Writers Program had positive effects on both teacher practices and a validated measure of students' text-based argument writing.

The National Writing Project's College-Ready Writers Program

The College-Ready Writers Program (CRWP) is designed to improve the argument writing of students in grades 7 through 10 by introducing teachers to new instructional practices. As with all National Writing Project work, local university-based site affiliates provide the professional development in their local service area. In the case of CRWP, the National Writing Project network supported 12 participating sites by developing tools and providing opportunities for sites to co-develop a shared understanding of argument writing and effective practices for teaching it to adolescents. The network also supported sites in adapting the model to local circumstances while maintaining core program features (see sidebar Components of the College-Ready Writers Program).

The CRWP Evaluation

SRI's research design for the evaluation was to randomly assign 44 rural high-poverty school districts to either the CRWP program or a control group. The study districts ranged in enrollment from 75 students to 6,593 students (the mean was 2,074); on average, approximately two-thirds of students in the districts were eligible for free or reduced-priced meals. The districts assigned to the control group engaged in business-as-usual professional development. The evaluation examined program implementation, teacher practice, and student writing over a 2-year period (2013 to 2015).

Components of the College-Ready Writers Program

Intensive professional development to support classroom implementation. The CRWP model calls for at least 80% of 7th- through 10th-grade English language arts teachers in each district to participate in at least 90 hours of CRWP professional development over 2 years (45 hours per year). In addition, CRWP professional development emphasizes support for classroom enactment via demonstration lessons, coaching, co-designing learning tasks, and co-planning.

Curricular resources. To further support classroom implementation, teachers received a set of National Writing Project-developed curricular resources (including “mini-units”) for argument writing. The CRWP mini-units were designed as 4- to 6-day instructional sequences through which students could form their own arguments and write multiparagraph pieces. Each unit engages students in reading multiple nonfiction texts and is intended to help students improve one or more key argument writing skills.

Formative assessment to inform instruction. CRWP involves the regular use of formative assessment tools to focus teachers’ analysis of student work. The tools are designed for teachers to use collaboratively to help identify what their students can already do with argument writing and where they need additional teaching.

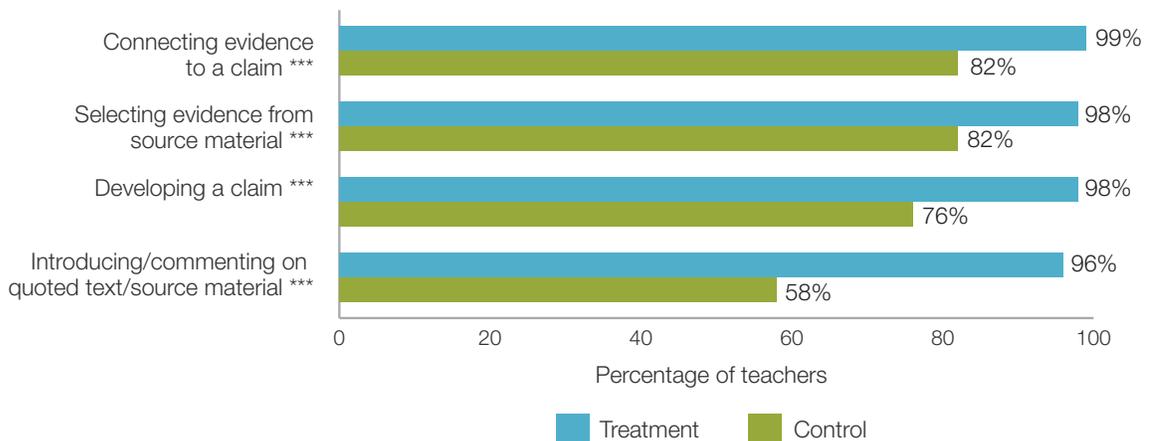
CRWP Was Implemented Largely as Intended

Despite the challenge of implementing a consistent program in 22 districts across 10 states delivered by 12 Writing Project sites, CRWP was implemented with a high degree of fidelity to key program components. Across the CRWP districts, 76% of English language arts teachers participated in at least 45 hours of professional development each year. Moreover, 89% of treatment teachers reported that planning with the Writing Project and/or colleagues supported their use of CRWP resources, while 73% reported observing Writing Project staff model the use of text-based argument tasks and/or benefiting from coaching or co-teaching support from the Writing Project as they implemented CRWP text-based argument tasks.

CRWP Teachers’ Instruction Focused More on the Key Components of Argument Writing Than Control Teachers’ Instruction

Teachers in CRWP districts took up the materials and approaches from the program. For example, 93% of treatment teachers reported teaching at least one CRWP mini-unit or text-based argument task. Because teachers used the ideas and materials presented in the program, the writing instruction that students experienced in treatment districts was significantly different from that in control districts. Teachers reported spending about the same amount of time on writing instruction in treatment and control districts, but treatment teachers had students work on argument writing on 41% of instructional days compared with 13% of days for control teachers. Treatment teachers were also significantly more likely to report placing a significant or heavy emphasis on key skills for source-based argument writing (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Teachers in CRWP districts were more likely to emphasize key argument writing skills



Source: SRI calculations using data from a 2015 study-administered survey.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

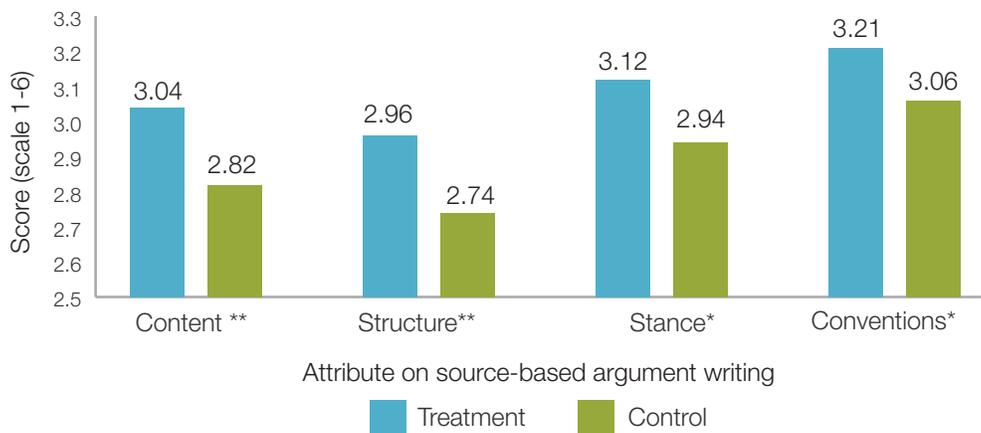
CRWP Students Demonstrated Greater Proficiency With Argument Writing Than Non-CRWP Students

CRWP had a positive, statistically significant impact on the four attributes of student writing—content, structure, stance, and conventions—measured by the Analytic Writing Continuum for Source-Based Argument Writing (see the sidebar Analytic Writing Continuum for Source-Based Argument Scoring Attributes). On a scale of 1–6, adjusting for baseline, students in CRWP districts outscored students in control districts, with average scores of 3.04 compared with 2.82 on content and 2.96 compared with 2.74 on structure ($p < .01$) (Figure 2). Differences in scores on stance and conventions followed the same trend (and were significant at $p < .05$).

“I have changed the way I teach the subject of writing. I no longer separate writing and reading. It’s all one subject. And I’ve actually changed to not just focus on literature, but to incorporate informational text.”

– CRWP teacher

Figure 2. Students in CRWP districts outperformed students attending control districts on four attributes of student writing (model adjusted)



Source: SRI calculations using data from a 2015 study-administered writing assessment.

Note: To improve precision of the estimates and account for the study design, the statistical model adjusted for factors such as students’ baseline writing scores and clustering of students within districts.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Analytic Writing Continuum for Source-Based Argument Scoring Attributes

Content (Including Quality of Reasoning and Use of Evidence): The content attribute describes how effectively the writing presents an argument supported by reasoning and developed through the use of evidence from sources.

Structure: The structure attribute describes how effectively the writing establishes an order and arrangement to enhance the central argument.

Stance: The stance attribute communicates a perspective through tone and style appropriate for the purpose and describes how effectively the writing establishes credibility.

Conventions: The conventions attribute describes how effectively the writing demonstrates age-appropriate control of usage, punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and paragraphing.

Conclusions

This evaluation of teacher professional development is one of the largest and most rigorous to find evidence of an impact on student academic outcomes. It found that CRWP affected student outcomes on a particularly complex task—writing an argument supported by reasoning and developed through the use of evidence from source material. This type of argument writing has been identified as critical to college and career readiness and is central to new academic standards for English language arts and literacy. Given that the evaluation found consistent implementation in more than 20 districts across 10 states, the findings suggest that CRWP can be effective in diverse settings.

“The professional development that [the Writing Project] put together and presented to us has been exceptionally helpful, because everything that they have gone over has been something that we could immediately go back to the classroom and implement and see results.”

– CRWP teacher

Notes

¹ College Board. (2004). *Writing: A ticket to work...Or a ticket out. A survey of business leaders*. New York, NY: Report of the National Commission on Writing for America’s Families, Schools, and Colleges.

² National Center for Education Statistics. (2012). *The nation’s report card: Writing 2011*. (NCES 2012–470). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.

³ Persky, H., Daane, M., & Jin Y. (2003). *The nation’s report card: Writing 2002*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics.

⁴ Santelises, S. B., & Dabrowski, J. (2015). *Checking in: Do classroom assignments reflect today’s higher standards?* Washington, DC: Education Trust.

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Silicon Valley

(SRI International headquarters)
333 Ravenswood Avenue
Menlo Park, CA 94025
+1.650.859.2000
education@sri.com

Washington, D.C.

1100 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 2800
Arlington, VA 22209
+1.703.524.2053

www.sri.com/education