



Recipients of the 2006 College Board Bob Costas Grants for the Teaching of Writing

JOHN CORNILLON, Middle States Region

“The coping responses judged necessary to survive in harsh and murderous neighborhoods spawned by poverty and the legacy of racism have molded most of the students I teach,” wrote John Cornillon, an English teacher at Harbor City High School in Baltimore, Maryland. “Many of my students have, over time, armored themselves against a world that shows little concern for their feelings or well-being. My goal is to help students examine and refine the expression of the true voice that resonates behind the mask and beneath the armor.”

Four years ago, Cornillon set out to tap into what he observed as powerful peer influences at Harbor City High School, an inner-city public alternative school. He believed that through writing, a new kind of student could emerge, whom he called “the creative person,” and exert a positive influence on his or her peers. He and a few students began by creating posters of student poems and collages in the hallways, and moved on to establish *Voices*, an annual anthology of student writing.

The powerful and raw style of *Voices* caught on and became a phenomenon at the school. It not only motivated students to write, but it also created a new enthusiasm for reading among students who “never read anything.” Other teachers began using the anthology of student work in their classrooms, and *Voices* became a source of pride within the community. One mother stopped Cornillon in a neighborhood store to tell him that *Voices* had saved her daughter from becoming an academic dropout.

Harbor City’s principal, Dr. Al Thompson, said that *Voices* created a connection between the “real world” and school for some students who hadn’t seen the relevance of what they learned in school to their lives. He added that over the past four years, John Cornillon’s enthusiasm for teaching has invigorated both experienced and new teachers at the high school, as well as his own work as principal.

BILLIE J. SMITH, Southern Region

Billie Smith is chair of the English department at McKinley High School in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. A Title I school, McKinley swelled from 800 to 1,000 with the arrival of new students and six teachers displaced by Hurricane Katrina. “For most of us,” Smith wrote, “Katrina will be among the most profound events of our lifetimes.” Her students have written journal entries and poems about the storm and its aftermath, and Smith will use the Bob Costas Grant to enable her students to interview storm survivors, visit and photograph New Orleans, and create an

anthology of writing to document what Smith describes as “the loss and renewal, the past and the future of our lives and our region.”

Seventy-five students are at work on the project that Smith hopes will provide a forum in which to share their progress as writers, and foster a sense of responsibility and pride in their work. “The ‘demystification’ of writing is accomplished by writing frequently and sharing that writing in whole-class discussions, teacher-student conferences, and peer response groups,” wrote Smith. “If a great poem starts as a lousy journal entry, students suddenly realize that good writing takes patience and work.”

Smith is a teacher consultant for the National Writing Project and the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project. Student Leslie Ellis admitted that she was nervous about taking Smith’s English III class because of its reputation for rigor, but Smith’s enthusiasm and her accessibility assuaged her fears and helped her develop new skills. Ellis wrote: “my writing skills improved exponentially, even though it was difficult in the beginning . . . I experienced a change in my attitude. I stopped walking into class with my head down. I became more confident.”

NANCY BARILE, New England Region

“My philosophy in teaching writing is grounded in the belief that all students can become successful writers,” wrote Nancy Barile, English teacher at Revere High School in Revere, Massachusetts. She teaches her students that scientists can be great writers, as can mathematicians, musicians, and philosophers, and most important, that good writing transcends ethnic and socioeconomic background.

At Revere High School, approximately 18 percent of the students were reported to speak English as a second language or have limited English proficiency. One of those students, Merzudin Ibrić, emigrated from Bosnia with his family in 1998 to seek medical care for his sister who was injured by a bomb in the war. “During my sophomore year, I was planning on dropping out of school so that I could get a job to help support my family. I was not interested in school, and my grades were terrible,” he wrote. Merzudin credited Barile with convincing him to stay in school and try out for the track team. Barile told him that “despite the fact that English was my second language, I could become a good writer.”

Barile worked closely with Merzudin on his composition skills and helped him to pass the state assessment test. In his senior year, Barile encouraged him to take AP[®] English, and though he was hesitant to take an advanced class, he received an A. Today, Merzudin is the recipient of a full scholarship to complete a postgraduate year at Phillips Andover Academy. At Barile’s prompting, he is writing a book about his personal experiences: “surviving the war in Bosnia; coming to the U.S.; adapting to a new culture and language; becoming a track star; and learning how to be a good student.”

Barile has been instrumental in designing the curriculum for the summer school English program as well as the curriculum for a Saturday school program focused on helping students develop the writing skills needed to pass the state assessment test's long composition component. Outside of the high school, Barile took part in a community writing project for Cambodian, Vietnamese, Chinese, Latino, and Bosnian youth that documented the history of community development in their urban area. She plans to use the Bob Costas Grant to bring back the high school's literary magazine, *Crossroads*, which was eliminated due to budget cuts. The last issue of *Crossroads* included a variety of student contributions, from political essays, to poetry written in Albanian, to a one-act play. Students from all performance levels will participate in writing, editing, and designing the publication.

New England Honorable Mentions:

JAMES SIEGEL, Massabesic High School

James Siegel, an English teacher at Massabesic High School in Waterboro, Maine, and a writer himself, has brought his enthusiasm for creative writing into the school, at first through informal after-school workshops and readings, and later through elective courses in creative writing and with a popular monthly "Open Mic" night held in the school's auditorium. Maine's Poet Laureate, Baron Wormser, whom Siegel has brought to Massabesic to perform and work with his students, wrote: "James is clearly a superb teacher . . . He shows his students how much writing matters as writing. Any student who spends time with James sees that the word—the right word—is important."

WAYNE BARR, Tantasqua Regional Senior High School

Wayne Barr, an English teacher at Tantasqua Regional Senior High School in Fiskdale, Massachusetts, transformed the school's routine journalism class by introducing an online newspaper, inspiring what students describe as "a drastic change" from apathy to excitement about writing. Students write and edit articles on school issues ranging from budget cuts, to class size, to athletics, and have engaged parents, as well as the community, who read the *Tantasqua Voice* online. "It has become more than a class assignment," students wrote. "It has become a bonding experience that united our class and ignited an interest in writing."

JENNIFER BUDENSKI, Midwestern Region

Students participating in the Artful Writing Project at the Hopkins Alternative Program Off-Campus Pavilion in Hopkins, Minnesota, are building their literacy skills by visiting the local Weisman Art Museum and responding to art. Jennifer Budenski, teacher and co-creator of the program, works with at-risk students who have been asked to leave a mainstream high school or who require a smaller setting.

A teaching museum for the University of Minnesota, the Weisman Museum is housed in a stainless-steel and brick building designed by Frank Gehry. The collection features early-twentieth-century American artists such as Georgia O'Keeffe and Marsden Hartley, as well as a diverse selection of contemporary art from

paintings to sculptures to installations. Visiting an art museum is an unfamiliar event for most of Budenski's students. One objective, she said, is to build bridges from their current experiences to the world of art.

Many of her students come to her in need of basic literacy skills. Others have strong literacy skills but have not felt motivated to demonstrate them in school. "I've tried begging them to write and read, coercing them to write and read, bribing them to write and read, showing them the practical applications of writing and reading," wrote Budenski. "Only when I have provided them with the same opportunity, expected of them the same degree of transformation that I expect in my AP classes—a chance to discover the power of a skillful, personal writing voice and to engage deeply with the voices of other writers—have I witnessed lasting learning."

Students visit the museum with members of Teens Rock the Mic, a group of young spoken-word artists. They then participate in writing activities triggered by their reaction to the artwork. The next step is to try their hand at writing for a poetry slam. They will also work with local painter, Kevin Kluever, and each student will create an acrylic on canvas in response to a piece of writing. The goal, Budenski said, is to translate literacy skills, from visual, to written, to spoken. Program director Deb Ludwig wrote: "Perhaps the most important goal of this project is to encourage student writers to see themselves as artists, making artistic choices in how to arrange words to capture and communicate ideas."

One student wrote: "The real thing that gets me through is we just don't write in class, we go to all walks of life for art, from sculpting, to music, to painting. . . . When you're in a room in which everyone is so into the class and assignments, that truly is a moment of peace and utter learning."

CalLEN TAYLOR, Western Region

In the forested area along the coast on California's Monterey Peninsula is a retreat center called Asilomar, where every year high school students from San Francisco's Mission High School spend three days in writing workshops. "I went to the writer's retreat last year and I think it was awesome," wrote one student, a young woman from Mongolia. "The background was relaxing and very comfortable to write. I concentrated more than I do at school."

The trip is the year-end culmination of the Mission Writers Project, led by History teacher Callen Taylor. On any given day, students at Mission High School are engaged in a wide range of writing—whether preparing for a poetry slam, working on a play, or composing nonfiction articles. It is all part of what Taylor calls a multilayered, real-world approach to writing. "The form, structure, and specific grammar tools are essential in the art of writing, but unless we give our students a real and authentic purpose for their writing, then teaching the form is pointless," she wrote.

Seventy percent of juniors and seniors participate in writing groups where students "give voice to their stories, learn to revise their work, and reflect on what they have

learned and accomplished.” They meet for after-school workshops in local cafes, participate in public readings, and visit with well-known authors at local library events. Students also learn how to use the Internet to conduct research and use software programs that help them organize their ideas and create a finished product.

All of this is accomplished through partnering with local community groups, including Youth Speaks, which holds poetry slams; Writers Corp, for nonfiction writing; Magic Theatre, where playwrights help students write and produce their own plays; and the tutoring program 826 Valencia. “Many of our students are recent immigrants and are in need of basic tools to help them express themselves in a new language,” Taylor explained. “Our students have so much to say, so many deep ideas and dreams just waiting to be transformed into the written word.”

Taylor’s student continued: “I just came here from Mongolia and sometimes I don’t have confidence in my writing and my ideas. But through my teachers and activities like the retreat, I feel I am getting better at expressing myself. . . . Maybe I will become an English major in college someday.”

MARY BETH BRITTON, Southwestern Region

Two Sunday afternoons a month, students from Pecos High School in Pecos, New Mexico, travel 60 miles round-trip to Santa Fe to the Kingston Residence Center to meet with senior citizens and to record their life stories. They conduct interviews, discuss drafts of their work with their subjects, and collaborate on a book of life stories. At the end of the school year, there is a reading of the finished product with both students and seniors performing. Over the past three years, students have met and written about a fascinating array of people, including Albert Einstein’s former secretary, a scientist who participated in the Manhattan Project, a woman who had tea with Indira Gandhi, and a woman who knew Eleanor Roosevelt.

Mary Beth Britton, language arts teacher and National Honor Society sponsor, leads the program with fellow teacher Susan Miera. A former student made the link between Britton’s successful writing instruction and her own aspirations for college: “Growing up in a place where many students dropped out of high school, married young, and did not pursue an education, made it tough not to fall into the same dilemma,” wrote University of New Mexico student Cristal Vasquez. “Had I not had the guidance of Mrs. Britton, and learned how to strengthen my writing skills, I do not trust that I would have had the confidence to pursue a high school diploma and a collegiate education.”

Britton explained: “Oral history projects reinforce the need for diligent practice in each phase of the writing process. Students recording the memories of others develop thorough understanding of the importance of revising and editing their work.” Once limited to members of the school’s National Honor Society, the program is now open to all students at Pecos High and welcomes students from Pojoaque High School, 35 miles north of Santa Fe.