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New independent study shows students in Teaching Matters' writing program significantly outperformed students in similar urban middle schools

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Many education groups are grappling to demonstrate that their teaching interventions have a positive effect. Two years of recently completed independent research show that Teaching Matters, Inc. has accomplished just that, with results that substantially outstrip those of comparison schools not served by Teaching Matters.

During the last two academic years (2010-2011 and 2011-2012), ALTA Solutions Group conducted a pilot study of "Writing Matters," a curriculum developed by Teaching Matters for use in urban middle schools. *Writing Matters* content was coupled with a strong coaching component. When paired, this content and delivery model created excellent outcomes for students: on average, the approximately one thousand 6th graders participating in *Writing Matters* improved by nearly 4 percentage points in their writing skills, while some schools posted average gains for their students of over 5 percentage points. Meanwhile, scores in some reference schools declined.

"This study illustrates how a high quality writing curriculum with meaningful onsite teacher collaboration can benefit teachers and students in urban middle schools," said Barbara Storandt, lead researcher and founder of ALTA Solutions. "Teaching Matters leveraged *Writing Matters* content and assessments, spurring results-oriented teacher discussions that were focused concretely on student writing successes and challenges. Their leading work serves as a model for what matters in middle school writing instruction."

"We consider our teacher team coaching and professional development the essential ingredient that really makes a difference in student results," said Lynette Guastaferro, Executive Director of Teaching Matters. "And we know that from our own past experience."

What happens without effective coaching? The numbers show that a good curriculum is not enough. Before coaching was systematically integrated with *Writing Matters* content, the only significant gains made by students were among children in the bottom quintile of those studied. When collaborative teacher supports were instituted, there was improvement across the board in each of the six sample *Writing Matters* schools.

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It remains true that those children in the bottom fifth who had the longest road to travel improved the most in both *Writing Matters* and reference settings, but in reference schools comparable children improved less, and some actually suffered a decline in their writing performance during the studied year. Happily, in *Writing Matters* schools nearly 60 percent (58.2) of students showed writing gains. In reference schools, fewer than a quarter (23.4%) did.

With New York moving toward “Common Core” standards that lay out what students need to know, and by when, another important finding of the study is that *Writing Matters* schools gained in “argument writing,” one of the Common Core’s key components. What distinguishes new common core standards from many previous measures is the ratcheting up of teaching and learning standards to focus on depth of understanding, rather than mere superficial knowledge. *Writing Matter’s* argument writing unit is closely aligned with what will be assessed. More *Writing Matters* schools saw improvement on argument writing, and their improvements exceeded those of reference schools.

Beyond the numbers, teachers told researchers that the *Writing Matters* program had helped them differentiate among student needs, and led them to have more conversations with their students about their learning. They gave substantial credit to their collaboration with Teaching Matters and the coaching they received for their students’ improvements.

Said one enthusiastic teacher, “*Writing Matters* creates success! I was able to see growth over the school year by using baseline assessments. Students became aware of expectations by using a detailed rubric and brainstorming...for their writing pieces.” She continued, “Being on a team was very hard but useful because you collaborate and communicate about student work...”

Since 1994, Teaching Matters has brought its services to more than half of New York City’s approximately 1500 public schools, with a special focus on those with the highest poverty populations. With the goal of helping all students reach their fullest academic potential, Teaching Matters works with school administrators and teachers to improve teaching methods and results.

“We are here as a resource for teachers, and through them, we serve the thousands of students each affects,” said Guastaferrro. “We are delighted with the outcome of the *Writing Matters* study, and hope to expand the program’s reach.”

For a copy of the full report, see <https://docs.google.com/open?id=0BzH8MtZX85NuWFAyWGNmb1YzVVk>
To join the 12/13 call about the report: <https://docs.google.com/open?id=0BzH8MtZX85NuSFZIVzFGanE4ek0>