TEACHERS INQUIRING INTO STANDARDS, TEACHING, AND LEARNING:

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT'S FOCUS ON STANDARDS PROJECT

Laura Stokes
Barbara Heenan
Mark St. John

INVERNESS RESEARCH ASSOCIATES
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In the spring of 1998, the NWP received funding from the Stuart Foundation to create a 3-year project called Focus on Standards (FOS). The project involved small groups of teachers from six NWP sites from California and Washington. The National Writing Project and the Stuart Foundation jointly contracted with Inverness Research Associates to study and evaluate the FOS project. We carried out the study between April 1998 and December 2000. This is the final report from that study.

The report addresses three broad questions:

1. To what extent did the FOS project offer participating teachers knowledge and skills they need to foster student improvement in writing with respect to state standards?

2. What are the key principles and design features of the NWP-FOS professional development model that supported teacher learning?

3. What contributions can such a professional development model make to standards-based reform efforts?

I. BACKGROUND

What gave rise to the FOS project

The FOS project was an experiment in professional development in the service of standards-based reform. It evolved as an investigation of how the National Writing Project could enable teachers to interact with state standards in constructive ways, i.e., in ways that would strengthen teachers' own standards, improve their teaching practices, and foster student learning with respect to standards. The FOS project was intended to benefit its participants directly. But beyond that, lessons learned from the FOS project can more generally inform funders and professional development providers about promising approaches to supporting teacher learning and change in standards-based reform environments.

To put the experiment in context, it is important to review the policy logic that gave rise to the standards-based reform environment surrounding the FOS project. It is also important to review the guiding assumptions of the National Writing Project, the parent and host of Focus on Standards.

The logic of standards-based reform

The standards-based reform movement emerged and gained momentum through the 1990's as a widespread policy response to perceived failings of public education. For

example, on international assessments, American students did not compare favorably with those of other highly developed countries[1]. Within the U.S., students from advantaged socio-economic populations consistently outperformed students from less advantaged backgrounds[2]. Key explanations for these failings—as well as the failings of earlier reforms to improve the system[3]—were, first, that schools did not operate from rigorous enough standards for curriculum and instruction and, further, that schools were not held accountable for ensuring that students from *all* backgrounds received the highest quality education possible. The policy response, at multiple levels of the education system, was thus to establish standards and accountability systems.

There are many proponents of and contributors to standards-based reform, each embracing—in language that varies only slightly—a fundamental logic, or theory, about how these policies function to improve student achievement[4]. The spine of standards-based reform is a three-part policy structure:

Key governing bodies for public education—most visibly, states—establish **standards** for what all students of a given age and grade level should know and be able to do. They also establish an **assessment** system that measures student achievement against those standards. They also establish an **accountability** system to hold those in districts, schools, and classrooms accountable to meeting those standards. The logic is that when those in the schools know what is expected and also know that they will be tested, they will then have both the information and incentive necessary to make the improvements that will lead to higher and more equitable achievement.

This logic has a simplicity and linearity to it that can be truly compelling. We also know, however, that policy implementation often does not match policy theory. Our study of the Focus on Standards Project portrays, from teachers' perspectives, some of

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[1] See James Stigler and James Hiebert's *The Teaching Gap* (1999, The Free Press, Simon and Schuster), as well as other publications stemming from the series of international mathematics and science assessments.

[2] This has long been documented, primarily through the use of National Assessment of Educational Progress results (National Center for Educational Statistics). The Education Trust, established in 1990 and dedicated primarily to the goal of equitable achievement of low-income and minority-race students, is a good resource for research on equity.

[3] The Pew Network for Standards-Based Reform, for example, grew from the belief that earlier reform efforts were "piecemeal, failed to focus on results, and held low expectations for students." (J. David and P. Shields, 2002: *"Returning results: Can schools do better? Standards-based reform steps up to the plate."*)

[4] We reviewed the rationales for adopting a standards-based approach to education improvement of a number of key reform organizations' (The Education Trust, the New Standards Project, the Pew Network for Standards-Based Reform) as well as the lead education agencies of the two states involved in the program (California Department of Education and Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction). There is no notable variation in the fundamental pillars of standards-based reform policy system and logic, though there is variation in different organizations' notions of where authority sits for building capacity for improvement.

the quite messy realities of these policies as they have unfolded in the two states. Additionally, the FOS project's work reveals that, even if this tri-partite set of policies has reasonable internal consistency in a state, what it means for teachers to develop a professional practice that reflects any particular set of standards is more complex than the fundamental logic of standards-based reform implies. In this report we offer a conception of how state standards policies can function constructively to support teacher learning and positive change in classroom practice.

The distinctive character of the National Writing Project

To understand or assess the FOS project, one must take into account that it was born of and took place within the NWP. In fact, the FOS leaders meant to devise what the coordinator called a "NWP way" to offer standards-related professional development. What does this mean? The following are examples of what the NWP describes as the basic "assumptions" and "beliefs" that guide its model of professional development[5]:

- Teachers are the best teachers of teachers; successful practicing teachers have greater credibility with their colleagues than outside experts.
- As the process of writing can best be understood by engaging in this process, teachers of writing should write.
- Real change in classroom practice doesn't happen all at once, but rather, over time.
- Effective professional development programs are on-going and systematic, bringing teachers together throughout their careers to examine successful practices and new developments.
- The National Writing Project, by promoting no single "right" approach to the teaching of writing, allows a critical examination of a variety of approaches from a variety of sources.
- The NWP taps what is known about writing and the teaching of writing from all sources: key research findings, important books and articles, and, most importantly, the classroom practices of effective teachers.

[5] From an NWP document called "Essentials of the Model" that NWP technical assistance staff use to orient new site directors.

These beliefs characterize an approach to professional development in which teachers have intellectual authority over their professional learning and improvement of their practice. These beliefs and the professional development designs that grow from them may seem obvious within the NWP, but they stand in contrast to assumptions that are still common in professional development programs for teachers.[6] In fact, some of the variation in teachers' experiences in the FOS project stemmed from the fact that, even within the NWP network, sites varied in the extent to which their program activities actually reflected these beliefs.

NWP beliefs about teachers' development of their professional practice imply companion beliefs about the nature of what kind of work teaching is, i.e., that teaching is a continual effort of problem-solving in which teachers must find and invent ways to bring particular students into engagement with discipline knowledge, skills, and practices, all for the purpose of advancing student understanding and intellectual development[7]. This vision of teaching and learning is clearly consistent with teachers' holding and following rigorous standards. It also acknowledges the very real demands on teachers to develop and draw from a deep reservoir of both "pedagogical content knowledge"[8] (in this case, writing and the teaching of writing) and knowledge of their students as learners. The NWP's approach to professional development thus involves teachers in doing their own writing within a community of active writers, and engaging in various ways in critical reflection on classroom practice[9]. In this professional development environment, state (or any other) standards are one of many available contributors to teachers' knowledge and judgment.

The FOS project was thus funded, designed, and evaluated as an experiment in which teachers interacted with state standards for the teaching of writing within the distinctively principled professional discourse culture and community of the National Writing Project:

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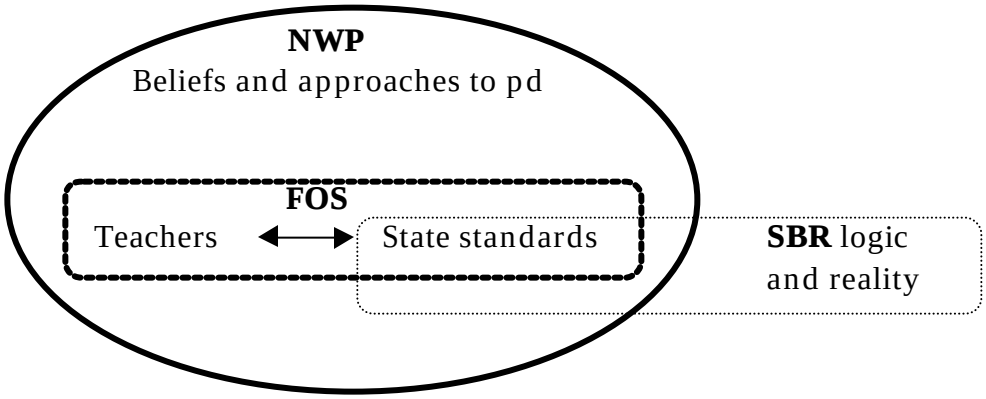
[6] One of the most thorough analyses of the contrast between a "training" model of teacher development and the more intellectual model of the NWP is Judith Warren Little's 1993 article: "Teachers' professional development in a climate of educational reform" in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 15* (2), 129-151. Our study of FOS (as well as other projects) have opened a window onto a professional development landscape where the use of training models is *increasing* as schools turn to scripted curricula in the urgency to raise standardized test scores.

[7] Two book-length examinations of this kind of learning (and what it takes to accomplish it) are Cohen, et al., Eds., *Teaching for Understanding: Challenges for Policy and Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993) and Newman & Associates, *Authentic Achievement: Restructuring Schools for Intellectual Quality* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996). In their evaluation of the NWP, the Academy for Educational Development used Newmann's definition of "intellectual quality" as a measure of NWP teachers' assignments.

[8] Cohen, et al. offer a good summary of this idea, based on the work of Lee Shulman and Deborah Ball.

[9] These core elements of NWP activities are described in the "Essentials of the Model" document.



Keeping in mind that the FOS project is a child of the NWP helps us observe the FOS project with the right lens, and it also puts reasonable limits on the inferences that can be made about whether FOS can serve broadly as a model for standards-based professional development. We believe it can and should serve as a model—but within the framework of the National Writing Project and other professional development settings that embody NWP-like principles.

The NWP's theory of action for the FOS project

With NWP beliefs and professional development practices as context and foundation, the FOS project was created in response to the particular challenge of how to support teachers in improving classroom teaching and student learning with respect to state standards. The theory of how FOS would do that, and what its intended outcomes would be, became more refined as the project got underway. [10] The more evolved theory of action as expressed midway through the project can be represented as the following series of premises: First, if teachers are supported in rigorous inquiry into teaching and learning—i.e., in close and careful analysis of their teaching practices and student work—they can design classroom instruction that fosters students' development in writing. Second, if teachers' inquiries focus on state standards in some way, teachers can translate standards into daily practice and thus design instruction that will help their students meet the standards. Third, teachers' inquiries can serve to document effective practice and student achievement—particularly in schools with ethnically and linguistically diverse student populations.

Our study focuses on this theory of action in two ways. First, we aim to portray teachers' "rigorous inquiry" into the teaching and learning of writing—what it looked

[10] In our first-year report, we suggested that the project creators had under-estimated the complexity of the challenge and had given too little attention to the design of the program. In this section, we are referring to the project's theory of action as the NWP outlined it in a November 1999 memo.

like and how it was supported in the FOS project—because we believe there is too little documentation of this form of professional development. Second, we wish to explore the accuracy of the premises above by examining the extent to which and ways in which teachers' inquiry into standards, teaching, and learning supported both teacher learning and student learning.

Participants in the Focus on Standards Project

The NWP invited sites from California and Washington to apply to become part of the Focus on Standards project. Two sites from each project were invited initially—Area 3 (Davis / Sacramento) and San Diego from California, and Central Washington and Puget Sound from Washington. Groups of 8-10 teachers from each site began the program with a 3-day kick-off institute in summer 1998. Two additional groups—UCLA and San Joaquin Valley (Fresno)—joined the project in the spring of 1999.

The participants shared some interests and experiences in common but ultimately the differences among the teachers were such that variation, rather than commonality, was the predominant characteristic of the group. Recognizing this variation is important to appreciating the way the project served its participants.

The project was intended to be an advanced professional development experience for NWP teachers. Participants were drawn from the ranks of teachers who had participated in an invitational summer institute, which is the core leadership development program at sites and one that assumes some level of skill and accomplishment as a teacher. Each site's group was to be facilitated by a teacher-consultant who brought to bear on the project some prior knowledge of state standards, and perhaps of teacher research, as well as a record of leadership in the site. In reality, however, the participants were a very mixed group. Some were long-time veterans of the classroom and also had more than a decade of involvement and leadership in their NWP sites; others were in the first five years of teaching and came directly to the FOS project from their first invitational institute. Some were familiar with state standards documents but many were not. Also, while a couple of the facilitators brought a background of specialized knowledge and skill to their role, most were scaling the same learning curve as their colleagues. As it turns out, this variation in the group was serendipitously beneficial to the study because we were able to see how the project model served the learning needs and inclinations of very different teachers.

Beyond the accidental variation, there was the intentional variation of two state reform contexts, California and Washington. Additionally, variation was automatically built into the project because of the dramatically different district, school, and classroom contexts in which the teachers worked. This study reinforces the fact that the "multiple

embedded contexts"[11] in which teachers work act as powerful forces on their classroom teaching; the study also shows how FOS supported teachers in context.

Finally, there was considerable variation among the students taught by FOS teachers with respect to their SES and language backgrounds. However, the majority of participants were working with students who were achieving below grade level, particularly the teachers in California. Much of their inquiry work centered on students who had the farthest distance to go to reach state standards.

The evaluation study

Our study spans the beginning of the project in spring 1998 through the end of organized activity December 2000. During the first year, our purpose was primarily formative. We shared our critical feedback about early project events with NWP leaders. We also shared with them our emerging insights about two functions the project could serve. We observed that it had potential to serve as the prototype of a professional development model for the NWP network, a purpose the funder had intended.

Second, we observed that a study of the project could generate knowledge for the field about how teachers develop standards for teaching and what role state standards can play in the enhancement of teaching. The design of the program enabled FOS teachers to direct their own interactions with state standards in ways they felt were useful and practicable within their teaching contexts; in so doing, the teachers made visible their teaching worlds and the ways in which they make sense of their work not only to themselves, but also to us as observers. In fact, we believe one of the lasting legacies of the project and study will be that it offers candid teachers' eye views onto the real landscape of standards-based reform as it is being implemented in states, schools, and districts, and thus, enables nuanced appreciation of what is involved in an effort to improve teaching and raise achievement.

We discussed our emergent findings and insights related to these purposes in a written progress report in August 1999. We then continued to observe the work of the project and gather evidence about it through December 2000.

This final report draws from the following sources of evidence:

- first-hand observations of the FOS summer meetings of 1998, 1999, and 2000

[11] McLaughlin, M.W. (1993). What matters most in teachers' workplace context? In Little, J.W. and McLaughlin, M.W. (eds.), *Teachers' work: Individuals, colleagues, and contexts.* New York: Teachers College Press.

- first-hand observations of selected meetings of three site groups in 1998-99, and meetings of the six site coordinators in 1998-99 and 1999-2000 (including review of documents)
- multiple interviews with the project coordinator and NWP staff throughout the project
- individual interviews with roughly half the project participants in all six sites in the spring of 2000
- a written survey of participants in all six sites in April 2000
- a day-long "explainers retreat" in summer 2000, where we invited two participants to walk us through exactly how they studied student work and what they learned from it
- a review of all participants' written reports of their inquiries, submitted in August 2000
- observation of three participants' presentations of their inquiry projects at the NWP annual meeting in November 2000

This report

In discussing the project and the lessons it holds, we have two purposes. One is of course evaluative: we want to offer our assessment of the effectiveness of this professional development model for the participants, as well as its promise and potential for contributing to improved teaching and learning with respect to standards. The second purpose is educative: we want to show those who are committed to educational improvement some of the "inner workings" of the project and of teachers' work and learning. We believe this is necessary to a fuller understanding of the project's theory of action *in* action, and also to a fuller understanding of what teaching with standards entails.

To serve these purposes, we have taken an inductive approach to organizing the evidence and examples in the report. First we illustrate with evidence from the project, and then we interpret and conclude, making direct inferences from the evidence and also sometimes drawing from our extensive experience studying teacher development and systemic reform initiatives. In Section II, the main body of the report, we give an account of the project as it unfolded. We identify the main activities teachers engaged in, portray the nature of the work they did and what they learned from it, and analyze how the design of the activities supported particular kinds of teacher work and learning. We also note implications related to student learning and achievement. Several vignettes are "thick" in description, enabling us to look over teachers' shoulders as they make sense of standards and make meaning from studying the work of their students. In this way, we have taken care to give voice to the participants' thoughts and experiences, without superimposing our own. In Section III, we quite briefly

summarize key findings and lessons learned from the project, presenting them as answers to the three framing questions.

We also include two appendices. One is a set of matrices that summarize the key teacher learning outcomes for each component of the project. The second one includes results of a written survey of participants we conducted in April 2000. We include the survey results because they reinforce in a general way what we learned from first-hand observation and in-depth interviews with the participants. But we have placed them in the appendix rather than the body of the report because, again, we believe the vignettes offer a much better lens through which to grasp the nature, value and benefits of the project, and the more general lessons it holds.

II. A PORTRAYAL OF TEACHERS' WORK AND LEARNING WITHIN THE FOS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT DESIGN

We observed five major focuses of teachers' activity in the FOS project, carried out in the components of work the project organized. They were:

1. **Becoming immersed in standards**
   (Summer institute 1998)

2. **Beginning to explore a standard through reflection on practice**
   (School-year 1998-99)

3. **Learning to analyze student writing through the technique of writing "digs"**
   (Summer institute 1999)

4. **Engaging in extended inquiries into teaching, learning, and standards**
   (School-year 1999-2000)

5. **Making meaning from inquiries through analysis and writing**
   (Summer institute 2000)

We devote a major subsection of the body of the report to each of these. For each, we move from the illustrative to the analytic, addressing the following questions:

The activity	- What was the purpose of the professional development activity in this phase? - How was it organized and led? - What types of activities did the teachers engage in?
Teachers' work and learning within the activity	- What was the nature and substance of teachers' work in this phase? - What issues and problems related to standards, teaching, and learning did they address? - What were their reasons for addressing them? - What aspects of their teaching contexts came into play as they worked to make sense of standards? - What did they learn from their work in this phase? - What implications were there for student learning? for achievement of standards?
The professional development design that supported teachers' work and fostered their learning	- What were the design principles underlying the activity? - What was the rationale for the particular design? - How did the design reflect NWP practices and values? - In what ways did these specific designs generate and contribute to teachers' learning?

Professional development component 1
Immersion in Standards

The activity

The teacher groups from the four original sites met for a 3-day kick-off institute in summer 1998. Their work focused on critical reading and structured discussion of formal standards documents currently in use in both states.

Before encountering state standards, though, the teachers wrote about and reflected on their pre-existing individual standards—standards that that project coordinator characterized as the ones they "have always held out" for their students. They also talked about how their own standards had evolved over time, and what their roots were.

The teachers then spent two full days reading closely and discussing the California and Washington standards for writing. Additionally, some read other standards documents that are currently in use, such as those from the 1997 California Education Roundtable and the New Standards Project. A few teachers also discussed Advanced Placement standards for writing, International Baccalaureate standards, as well as University of

California and California State University standards. The Washington teachers also studied Washington Assessment of Student Learning criteria, as well as teacher handbooks that were a supplement to the content standards. Additionally, the participants read and discussed published articles about the role of formal standards in system reform and in teaching practice[12]. In their discussions, the teachers compared the standards documents' contents and formats. They also shared their initial impressions about the extent to which their current practices "matched" the standards. In these ways they informed themselves of the formal state standards and began exploring the extent to which the documents "made sense" to them and could be "helpful" to their teaching[13].

In framing and facilitating this first component of work, the project coordinator characterized the FOS project as one in which teachers would have the chance to "talk about state standards in NWP terms—to unfold a way of working in the next three years that focuses on what good teachers do to make sense of standards, and to play out standards in their teaching. " She also said the teachers' work would "focus on the kids we are concerned about—the ELL kids, the other kids that have real needs," and emphasized that "the bottom line is that we're looking for writing improvement."

The substance of teachers' discussions

In discussing their pre-existing individual standards, the teachers referred to the fact that what one learns from the experience of teaching strongly influences one's individual standards—i.e., after teaching 7th grade for 15 years, a teacher develops robust ideas (for better or worse) about what 7th graders should know and be able to do. Veterans of their NWP sites described the Writing Project as a place where they had "worked through" their personal standards and strengthened them by reflecting on teaching practices and beliefs with other teachers, by writing, and by reading research on writing. A few teachers said their colleagues at school had also served as a formative professional community. For the participants who had been teaching for five years or less and who were new to their NWP sites, becoming involved with the Writing Project was giving them confidence that they were "in sync" with those leading the profession. These conversations made it clear that the Writing Project is a place where the standards that teachers have derived from their personal experience as teachers interact with and are shaped by the standards of the broader professional community.

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[12] These included three from the November 1997 issue of the *Phi Delta Kappan*, which was devoted to commentary on standards-based reform: W. Berkson, "A place to stand: Breaking the impasse over standards,"; C. Reigeluth, "Educational standards: To standardize or customize learning?"; and L. Darling-Hammond and B. Falk, "Using standards and assessments to support student learning." The teachers also read an article by Grant Wiggins entitled "Standards, not standardization: Evoking quality student work" (*Educational Leadership*, February 1991).

[13] In this and other places, we use quotation marks to identify the participants' language.

FOS participants came to the project with varying degrees of familiarity with state standards. None of them, however, had had a chance to read the documents carefully and discuss them openly and critically with colleagues. And while many of them had shared opinions privately, none of them had had the opportunity to formulate thoughtfully, and give public voice to in a professional setting, ideas about how the state standards compared to their own personal standards.

The teachers voiced quite distinct reactions to the different state standards. They deemed the Washington standards more "sensible" with respect to classroom practice because they supported a developmental continuum of writing development, were framed as "big teaching ideas" that seemed to accommodate a range of specific teaching approaches, and came with assessment criteria and benchmarks for writing performances that the teachers found valid and helpful. In short, the Washington standards had good potential to, as one teacher said, "help me by reminding me what to make sure to cover in my classroom." The California standards, by contrast, were deemed less sensible at face value because they consisted of "bits and pieces" of skills that did not reflect a reasonable theory of writing, espoused an "absolute" rather than "developmental" approach to moving through the grades, were divorced from good writing assessments, and lacked clear benchmarks of performance.

The Washington teachers also accepted their state's standards as being more legitimate because they were drawn from knowledge of the profession (many participants knew people who had helped create them), while teachers in California felt the standards were suspect because they seemed to be the product of political motivation. California teachers nonetheless agreed that the state standards were a "fact of life" that has potency for the general public and the hierarchy of the education system. In fact, some said they had joined FOS so they could gain some control over standards-based reform rather than having it "done to them." FOS was a "safe place" where they could critically examine the standards and explore how they connected to teaching.

Regardless of their different assessment of the quality of the documents, teachers in both states agreed in principle that states should create clear statements of high standards. First, as teachers of students, they want to be informed of and responsive to the "big picture" of public expectations. Second, as leaders in their schools, they believe state standards for writing have the potential to give them more leverage in working to increase the priority for teaching writing and to communicate with parents and the community.

Teachers in both states expressed repeatedly their concern about what the consequences of these documents (and related policies, such as new policies for retaining students who do not reach a certain level of achievement on state assessments) would be for the students who would struggle most to achieve state standards. "These aren't going to

help us deal with the kids who are the farthest away from the norms of the standards." Many said they were frustrated that the demand to teach the neediest students does not come with the support they need. "Who's going to give my kids the resources they need to really achieve this?" one said. Another noted, "I haven't heard the term 'opportunity standards' for about five years and even then it was only talk."

What teachers learned

It might seem to go without saying that knowing the formal standards documents inside out is an important first step in any effort to implement state standards. But what is noteworthy is that—even for these teachers who are seen as being responsible for leading the way—FOS gave them what was, from their perspective and experience, a unique invitation to begin focusing on state standards in a fully intellectual and professional manner, as informed critics and as practitioners. FOS teachers became deeply familiar with and conversant in the format, language, and concepts of the standards documents most relevant to their teaching assignment, and also those that apply to students below and above their own grade levels. They also became more broadly knowledgeable about multiple standards documents and the features of them that are most and least informative to teachers.

The teachers also became more conscious of their pre-existing individual standards, first by expressing them out loud, and then by exploring the ways and extent to which they were and were not consistent with those of state standards, other formal standards they consider themselves accountable to, one another's standards as members of the NWP, and the standards of their school colleagues.

Key design principles of this activity

In a carefully sequenced series of discussions, teachers first identified standards they already held, then became deeply informed about the actual content and format of formal standards documents (from their states and other sources), and then began considering how to conceptualize connections between these various standards and classroom practice. This design took into account important realities of state standards documents and what it means for teachers to adopt them. For example, no teacher is standards-free; instead, they bring their pre-existing individual standards to bear on any new set of standards. Often, teachers' individual and personal standards remain tacit—hidden and unexamined—which diminishes the clarity and integrity with which they can interact with new external standards. Also, there is no such thing as *the* standards; rather, there are myriad sets of formal, published standards available to teachers at any given point in time. Not all standards documents are equal in quality and potential value to teachers and their students. These facts may seem quite obvious when they are brought to light as they were in the teachers' conversations, but professional development associated with state standards often ignores them. The FOS

project was able to engineer in-depth, constructive encounters between teachers and various set of formal standards, and between teachers and teachers, that honored the complexity of the task of "making sense of standards."

The three days were also, somewhat subtly, meant to reinforce a principle underlying the Writing Project's way of doing business: regardless of the focus of the activity, the NWP invites teachers to adopt a stance toward their own professional learning that is both practical and inquisitive, and compels them to tackle the most challenging problems of practice. It is also important to state what the operating principle was *not*: the teachers' reading and discussion were not circumscribed by a system mandate to comply—to uncritically accept, align themselves with, or implement state standards in a prescribed way. Instead, the project's approach would be to provide teachers with the support and resources to forge their own understandings and practices. Metaphorically speaking, the "NWP way" was not to ask teachers to leave their professional perspective and enter the universe of the standards documents, but rather, to invite the state standards into their homes as an important guest.

Focusing on the standards in this kind of self-directed and critical way turned out not to be uniformly comfortable for each participant. Those who anticipated the year's work with confidence were members of NWP sites whose work reflected well the basic beliefs and practices of the NWP, where teachers have great authority. In contrast, a small number of participants who were less experienced with critical reflection left the kick-off institute feeling uncertain about the purpose of the project and anxious about the next step. This difference helped shed light on some variation that exists within the NWP network and, more generally, on the contrasting experiences teachers can have in professional development programs that stem from different principles.

Professional development component 2
Initial exploration of a selected standard in relation to classroom practice

The activity

During the academic year 1998-99, each FOS group met locally every month for discussion, with individual work occurring between meetings. The major task for the year was to identify one or more relevant state standards on which to focus and begin the effort to "make sense" of them through reflection on teaching practice and examination of student work. By year's end, participants were to have prepared a fairly informal but substantial piece of writing about what they were learning and how they connected that to the standard(s).

The project coordinator's role was to support the local group facilitators as they guided the participants' explorations. She offered the following to the team leaders as possible avenues into the work:

- *Focus on student writing*: What are the teachers observing in students' writing that reflects the students' skill levels and their writing development? How is that informing teachers' instructional decisions?

- *Focus on teaching practices*: What topics, problems, and genres of writing are teachers emphasizing? In what order and sequence? Why?

- *Focus on standards*: In what ways are the standards informing teachers' analysis of student writing and their instructional decisions about what to teach and when?

- *Relationship between these three*: which of these focuses is more important and valuable to teachers in guiding their instructional decisions? in what ways do these different sources of instructional decision-making serve as "checks" on one another?

In November and March the FOS coordinator met with the facilitators to give them articles (teacher-written studies as well as articles about standards and practice) and other resources, to clarify purposes of the project, and to otherwise help them facilitate the groups. These meetings emphasized the need for teachers to "collect data" related to writing improvement and to "learn from student writing" about how standards, classroom practice and student development are related. In between, the project coordinator was in email contact and paid some visits to local groups.

The nature and substance of the groups' work

Here we offer snapshots of the work of three different groups early in the year. The teachers' conversations reveal some of the complexities that are inherent in the work of teaching and thus impinge on teachers' efforts to implement state standards policy at the level of classroom practice. They also show different ways that standards documents affect teachers.

October 1998 - in California

One group had agreed to begin the year's exploration by reviewing existing writing assignments in order to see which state standards they were addressing and where there were "gaps." At this meeting, they shared ideas about how they could use the standards to fill these gaps. One teacher, for example, proposed that she could add an oral presentation requirement to an existing term paper assignment so that it would address the "public speaking" standard. Another

thought she could initiate a class newsletter for parents to teach her students to write for "a variety of audiences."

Teachers' conceptions of how the state standards affected their practices emerged from these discussions. One teacher said, "The standards have changed my view, pushed my limits. What I thought was OK two years ago is not enough now." The teachers agreed that they could not "follow" the standards in anything like the "checklist" or "piecemeal" fashion in which they were structured. Rather, the standards would have to be "re-combined" before being translated into lessons.

The teachers also discussed the powerful, sometimes debilitating, constraints they experienced in their schools and districts. In fact, they found it inconceivable to discuss standards or teaching absent these conditions. For example, at one high school, the administration had changed course schedules so that a full semester of English was supposed to be taught in a block of six weeks; for some juniors and seniors, this meant that their college-prep writing instruction for the whole year ended before Thanksgiving. At an elementary school, a teacher was pressured to teach what she called a "programmed" or "scripted" literacy curriculum that would prevent her from using the writing assignments and lessons she had spent decades using with good effect—and would prevent her from addressing the state writing standards. As a group, these teachers discussed the challenges of trying to help "outsiders"[14] understand the ways in which school and district policies affect their work, including their capacity to make constructive use of standards documents.

November 10 – in California

Another group of nine teachers had agreed at their first meeting that they would all focus on the state's Writing Standard #1 and examine teaching strategies designed to help students to meet that standard. This standard specifies--with variation across grades--that students be able to write well-reasoned, tightly structured, and focused paragraphs and essays. For this meeting, they had agreed to bring in for discussion an initial set of writing samples from their students that were based on this standard. Most teachers had brought in samples from high, middle, and low students.

They did not examine the papers in depth, but rather referred to them in general terms. The obvious differences in students' skills brought to the surface the teachers' concern about the plight of low-performing students. One teacher pointed out that the state standards offer her no help in addressing the realities of teaching and learning that she and her "at-risk" students face. "What these students need is more than I can offer. They need 1-to-1 teaching, a lot of it. It's not that they can't ever reach this standard—but I don't know how to help them

[14] By that, they meant non-teachers or, more generally, those who do not understand teaching from teachers' perspectives

reach it in the time and circumstances we have." In the face of these realities, the group explored how they use the FOS project to make students' progress visible: "Standards are better at identifying failure than success; you either meet the standard or you fail. The public only knows how to read scores, not improvement." The group decided to try, over the year, to "collect student work that shows markers of improvement toward the standards."

The teachers also discussed the plethora of standards to which they are held accountable. One pointed out that in her program, she is held to four sets of standards—state content standards for reading; state standards for teaching reading; state standards for the teaching profession; and the district's standards for reading. She noted that they are all inconsistent with one another and also inconsistent with the SAT 9 tests. Another pointed out that Advanced Placement standards, International Baccalaureate standards, and the California State University and University of California writing standards for freshmen are all more relevant to her juniors and seniors than are the state standards. Also, she noted, these other standards are more useful to her as a teacher because they have performance benchmarks attached and the state's do not. A third said that her high school department had, along with several others, spent a year working to align their curriculum with New Standards—and that the state and district standards (which are different from each other and from New Standards) were threatening to undermine that work. Despite these circumstances, however, the group believed it was politically important that they make a good faith effort to embrace and try to "implement" the state standards in their classrooms.

January 23 – in Washington

One group of eight had decided to work toward the overall goal of documenting the extent to which students could demonstrate progress toward a state writing standard, according to the performance criteria in use in Washington. Unlike California participants, these teachers felt their state was going in the right direction in promoting writing instruction through development of standards that had been derived from good practice and through institution of a performance-based writing assessment. These new policies were in their infancy in 1998 and the teachers were optimistic that the standards would motivate more teachers to teach more writing. At the same time, however, some were beginning to fear that recent changes in their school policies—away from emphasizing writing, and toward emphasizing reading, science, and technology—would undermine their ability to teach writing as much as they believed was necessary.

Though this group had intended to discuss writing samples, it turned out that they instead focused on the lessons that had generated the writing. They shared and discussed many practical "nuts and bolts" teaching ideas. In fact, this group spent most of their sessions in this fashion, having what they called a "grand conversation" about teaching. These sharing sessions helped build their

repertoires of practice—an experience they had previously had little of in their NWP site.

These discussions also brought to the surface uncertainties they face as teachers—uncertainties that state standards alone do not address. Nearly all them felt unprepared for and unsupported in teaching English Language Learners. As one teacher said, “How do people really acquire a second language? Why do some ESL kids grow in their writing and others are stuck? How do you know where to really start with them and what to do next?" They found no solace in the standards or in the assessment system, however much they believed that it was appropriate to have these policies. One teacher pointed out: “We can give our kids scores against the standards and even teach the kids to evaluate themselves. But the standards are not what we are really using to teach our [ELL] kids. Our best teaching of them may not be helped by the standards."

What teachers learned and gained from this work

What teachers learned this year varied across the groups and across individuals. In groups with less experienced facilitators, some participants (and the facilitators) felt they had made only modest forays into the problem at hand, and they weren’t sure if what they were working on was “right." They had spent a good part of the year discussing general approaches to teaching in what they called a “show and tell" mode, rather than in examining concrete evidence of practice and its results for students. As the year came to a close, quite a few participants began to express confusion and anxiety in the face of the expectation that they were supposed to bring to the upcoming summer gathering some written documentation of student progress related to standards.

Even in these discussions, however, teachers gained practical teaching ideas as they shared information. Some teachers new to their careers spent the year mapping out a new instructional unit that was connected to a standard. In this way FOS helped them begin to expand their repertoires of practice by giving them support for translating the abstract language of a state standard into concrete curriculum and lessons. Some experienced teachers also made plans to enhance their curriculum by creating units that filled “gaps" they had uncovered when they compared their classroom plans with what the standards said their students should be doing. In this way, the year’s activity fostered changes in practice related to specific standards.

A good number of participants formed an interest in documenting the writing development of their least skilled students. They too made some changes in their teaching. For some of these teachers, the FOS project was the first time they had ever focused their attention *primarily* on the development of their lowest-performing students. What gave teachers permission and support for this focus was explicit encouragement from the project to do so in an exploratory fashion, combined with

freedom from what the teachers saw as the failure-oriented accountability system of their schools ("Standards are better at identifying failure than success; you either meet the standard or you fail").

Veterans of writing project sites where there was a tradition of teacher research did embark on more evidence-based studies, again with a special interest in students working below state standards. These teachers found that the year was too short to accommodate their quite avid searches for insight: they had collected quantities of student work and uncovered too much that was interesting and problematic.

Design principles and assumptions underlying this phase

The design for this year's work derived primarily from the NWP's experience supporting groups of teacher-researchers. The NWP aims to support reflective practice in all its activities, but the year-round (or multi-year) teacher research programs are the NWP activity that structures inquiry into practice most rigorously and in the most sustained way, and thus TR groups are the closest existing instantiation of the theory-of-action that informed the Focus on Standards Project. In NWP teacher research groups, teachers explore and eventually define problems of practice specific to their classrooms and teaching contexts. They inquire deeply into those problems in several ways, but primarily through a focused examination of specific teaching practices and the student work that arises from those practices. Individuals typically work on their own projects, but they discuss their studies in regular meetings with colleagues who are also carrying out inquiries.

Similarly, in the FOS project, participants in each site group were to identify a state standard that was of interest to them, and then to begin examining their teaching practice and student work in relationship to that standard. They would collect samples of student writing and analyze its features, record their thoughts and observations in a journal, and discuss their emerging insights and questions with their colleagues. The idea was that through this process teachers would generate knowledge unique to their teaching situations but also linked to state standards, and knowledge tempered as well by the collective wisdom of the group. Additionally, they would be able to produce documentation of student improvement.

Several assumptions underlay the application of this teacher research model to the FOS project. One was that the participants would come to FOS with a foundation of NWP experience where they had critically reflected on practice in professional dialogue. A second was that the facilitators (and the supporting site directors) would have sufficient specialized knowledge and skill to be able to guide teachers in processes of classroom inquiry, e.g., in-depth analysis of student writing as evidence of practice. A third assumption was that participants would be able, in the space of several months, to construct a clear and productive relationship among the state standards documents,

their personal standards and practices, and their students' progress, and be able to produce insights about effective practice and student learning.

The experiences of the groups during the year challenged these assumptions. In part, the design and plan for the year's work was simply overly ambitious given the complexity of the project's goals; the sorts of work the teachers were doing simply needed more time to unfold[15]. At the same time, NWP leaders realized that they needed to make a heavier investment in coordinating and guiding the local groups' work.

Professional development component 3
Learning to analyze student writing through the technique of writing "digs"

The activity

For three days in the summer of 1999, participants from all projects came together for a second time. [16] The original vision for this second gathering was that participants would bring to fruition their classroom studies and take a first step toward the next task of improving parent and community understanding about standards, teaching, and learning. However, the participants were not close to approaching this stage. Nearly all but the most experienced veterans of teacher research felt they did not yet have the skills needed to interrogate student writing as data. Thus, the project director re-conceptualized and re-designed this summer meeting so that it became an intensive workshop on how to systematically examine student writing to learn about writing development, classroom practice, and standards.

Before the summer meeting, the FOS coordinator introduced into each local group the notion of doing a "writing dig", i.e., a type of systematic probe into students' written work as an artifact of teaching and learning. The archaeological metaphor was explicitly at work here—and the earth that was being dug into at this point was student writing, with the state standards fading into the background for the moment. Supporting this process was a new tool that could serve as what the coordinator called "a vehicle for analysis"[17]. It is a spidery-looking schematic diagram giving teachers specific entry points into analysis of student writing. Activities related to the "writing dig" would be the core work of the institute.

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[15] In our first-year report, we observed that the project itself had under-estimated the complexity of what it means for teachers to have a constructive interaction with state standards vis a vis teaching and learning in their own classrooms. In our account, below, of the next year's work we try to portray some of what is involved.

[16] In March 1999, the UCLA and San Joaquin Valley (Fresno) sites joined the project.

[17] A copy is attached as Appendix C.

Teachers participated in the following carefully sequenced and facilitated activities during the 3-day meeting:

- ♦ Focused discussion of articles as models of inquiry

In their small site groups, teachers discussed articles written by teacher-researchers. These served as vivid and accessible examples of the connections teachers can make between data about student learning (in the form of student work) and the examination of their own teaching practice. The following questions helped the FOS participants make use of these models:

- What issues/elements/topics do you find in these articles that you also find in the writing dig?
- What kind of data does the author use? How does the author use data?
- What does the author learn about his/her practice by examining student work?
- What other information could the author have included to help you understand the context of the student's assignment, and the author's teaching practice?
- In what ways do these articles reflect your work with Standards?

- ♦ Presentations of four examples of "writing digs"

The FOS director herself, along with three other participants whom she had coached, presented examples of "writing digs" in order to show participants various ways they could use the analytic tool to examine and construct ways that standards relate to teaching and learning. The FOS director focused on analysis of the writing of ELL students with respect to culture and to state standards; two teachers at different grade levels showed how they were learning about their own practice and about the standards by studying the development of a single low-achieving student over time; another demonstrated how she had used state standards to create and test the efficacy of a new curriculum unit.[18] The varied approaches they took demonstrated how the analytical tool used for the "digs" could support inquiry into a wide range of questions. However, the presentations collectively demonstrated the power of the "dig" to unearth and bring to light specific matters of teaching practice and instances of student learning, and thus to help teachers learn.

- ♦ Participants work on their own "digs" in small groups

The participants met in small groups to share their own digs-in-progress, using the artifacts of teaching and learning they had brought from their classrooms. For most

[18] We do not portray the substance of these "dig" presentations in detail here. Rather, we portray the work of the same three teachers—along with others—in the discussion (below) of Component 4 of the project. The later portraits exemplify the use of the dig, as well as putting that activity into the larger context of year-long inquiries.

participants, this was a first foray into in-depth analysis of evidence of teaching and learning. The agenda also included several blocks of time for the teachers to write about what they were learning and then to discuss with one another what they had written. As the FOS coordinator reported, "The coffee was going, the snacks were everywhere, and I stuck by the printer to help people get drafts off disks. We locked the doors at 1:00 a.m."

What teachers learned from these activities

In this meeting participants gained knowledge and skills enabling them to embark with greater confidence and clarity on more focused and in-depth inquiries during the second year. Moreover, teachers began to become more articulate (less intuitive and tacit) in explaining teaching problems and decisions, as well as student progress. One benefit of the dig was that it gave teachers a means to begin verbalizing how they make connections between what they see in student work and the decision-making and problem-solving that lie at the heart of teaching.

As teachers practiced their digs with one another in conversation—sharing student work, talking about its features and about the assignments that produced it—teachers experienced the secondary benefit of gaining deeper insight into their peers' standards and their practical knowledge of teaching and learning.

Key design features

There are several interesting elements to the design of this meeting. In its overall structure and intent, it was an extended and intensive version of a basic building block of the NWP: a "demonstration workshop"[19] designed to teach one's colleagues about a specific approach to practice—in this case, an approach to analyzing student work to inform teaching. The workshop offered models, demonstrations, and opportunities to try out the approach in a climate of support. The project coordinator had also carefully coached the three teachers who shared their digs with group, again drawing from the NWP's practice of building the capacities of teachers to teach one another.

On a more micro level, the concept of the "writing dig"—along with the tools, models, discussion, and writing activities surrounding it—functioned as what we call a "generative structure" for learning. By that we mean that it offered teachers a concrete set of entry points into the analysis they needed to do, and it helped them develop specific skills, but it did not circumscribe what they could learn or in any other way take them out of the intellectual driver's seat. In fact, part of the beauty of this writing dig schema was that both new and experienced teachers could make it work for them.

[19] Demonstrations are described as core components of NWP professional development in the "Essential of the Model" document.

This kind of structure is not unique to the NWP but it is characteristic of their work and consistent with their principles.

Finally, what made the workshop and the new analytic tool effective was that it was the right design for the right learning moment. The participants were stuck—both as individuals and as a project collective—on the problem of how to study student writing in depth. They received direct instruction in how to do that when they needed it.

Professional development component 4
Individual inquiries into teaching and learning

The activity

Throughout the 1999-2000 school year, FOS participants carried out individual inquiries into teaching and learning, often in relation to a selected state standard or performance criterion. This year's activity was organized the same way as that of the year before, on the NWP's model of teacher research. Teachers carried out individual work, coming together once a month to share their progress. The end product was to be a written account of the inquiry, possibly even a draft research article that had potential to be published.

Profiles of the teachers' inquiries

Below we profile six teachers and their inquiry projects. We selected these six because they reflect the range of backgrounds that teachers brought to the project and the varying contexts in which they teach. Taken together, these vignettes bring to light important realities about what it means for teachers to put state standards into practice, as well as some of the ways the Writing Project supports their learning.

Lisa Winton[20]

Lisa is a member of the teacher vanguard of Washington's standards-based reform movement, as are other FOS participants from her site. She has taken an active role in her district, which Lisa says is a "frontrunner" in the standards movement, a "proactive and progressive" district which has worked at a "very fast pace" to align its curriculum, assessments and promotion policy with the new state standards.

Certified as a K-12 ESL teacher, Lisa had been teaching 3rd and 4th grade for 7 years at the time of our interview. She considered herself a relatively new

[20] This teacher's name, and all other teacher names in the paper, have been changed.

teacher, although she was more senior than the rest of her FOS group. By her own admission, because of her unfamiliarity with teacher research, Lisa had difficulty zeroing in on a research topic. However, not having a clearly articulated research question did not prevent her from using her FOS experience to address issues of standards in her classroom. Her tack was to start with the standards first, using them as a kind of checklist to see what was missing in her practice. In fact, Lisa serves as a classic example of a relatively new teacher who uses standards to help her design building blocks of instructional practice.

"Being involved in the Writing Project has made me view writing very differently than I did. I believe now that there has to be a connection between writing and students' lives." That's why when Lisa reviewed the second grade Essential Academic Learning Requirements the one that stood out for her involved this kind of connection. She has focused on the following EALR: "The student writes in a variety of forms for different audiences and purposes." For two years in a row Lisa developed classroom curriculum focused on helping her students write to a variety of audiences—beginning with writing for oneself, and then moving outward to peers, the teacher, parents, the school principal, and (most ambitiously) community and business members. Lisa also explained that, as part of her FOS work, she planned lessons where her students write in all content areas. She wants her students to "make bridges" between writing and other subjects. Her aim is to develop "an integrated, merged curriculum." "I don't think of the school day as 15 minutes of spelling and a half hour of writing anymore."

For Lisa, the Washington State Standards serve several functions, as they were ideally intended to do. First, they serve as a source of inspiration to her because she sees them as an outgrowth of a progressive, reform effort that is aimed at improving instruction for children. They also serve as a comprehensive inventory of learnings her students should achieve; therefore she uses them as a kind of checklist, as she did in her FOS work. However, this does not mean that Lisa is an uncritical follower. On the contrary, she began this year to distinguish between the standards themselves (which she sees as good for children), and the implementation of standards-based reform, which she is beginning to question in relationship to the stress on teachers, the investment of school time, the amount of busy work, the inclination of many to pay it only lip service, and the emphasis on testing.

The Writing Project has come to embody a developing set of professional standards for Lisa. The internal dynamic between the mores of the Writing Project and the standards-based reform effort in her school and district have been mutually beneficial for her. She sees what she learns at the Writing Project as helping her realize the state standards, and she sees the state standards as giving her an overarching framework in which to organize her newly acquired ideas about the teaching of writing.

Bob Jarvey

Bob Jarvey had been a professional in a demanding non-education field before becoming, very happily, a teacher. He came to the FOS project with 5 years' teaching experience and 2 years' involvement with his Writing Project site. His elementary school, in a middle class neighborhood, has a history of relatively high achievement; unlike most FOS teachers, Bob did not feel the pressure to raise test scores at any cost as some of his colleagues in other schools did. In fact, at his school, the challenge was to push successful students as far as they could go. This drive came not from the fairly satisfied parents, nor from the state or district, but rather from within the school staff itself.

The whole time Bob had been at his school, the staff had been working in a concerted way to create a standards-based curriculum and assessment system for writing. Over time they had drawn from multiple sources of standards: those in California's Program Quality Review (PQR) documents, the California Department of Education's "Challenge Standards," the formal standards of his school district, drafts of state standards as they became public, as well as what he called their own school standards. Bob felt it was ironic that they ultimately adopted a set of standards documents that soon disappeared from the political scene: "We went through all of them and went with the Challenge Standards. We thought they were best for our kids. But of course, the Challenge program is dead now!" Nonetheless, the process of examining all of the standards and working with his colleagues to write curriculum and develop assessment criteria gave Bob confidence that he understood in a concrete way the expectations that his school held for student performance. He also felt able to assess his students' proficiency levels.

The difficulty Bob faced as an early-career teacher without a store of practice was that he did not know *how*, exactly, to teach what the assessments and standards told him his students needed to learn. "The standards don't help you achieve them." he said. "They might help me know what lessons my kids need, but I have to devise them." Bob foraged for lesson ideas from many sources—books he picked up at conferences, activities of his writing project site, his colleagues—to get help in building bridges that would cross the chasm between the standards and his students.

The FOS project gave Bob an opportunity to shift his focus from the building of lessons to examination of his students' responses to the lessons. This enabled him to observe, for the first time, how varied his students were as learners. For his inquiry project, he had initially wanted to experiment with varying his instruction to meet the needs of "low" and "high" students. But when he more carefully studied the work of a range of students, he realized that the "middle" students challenged him at least as much: "They're so individual! There are so many variations in how they respond to my instruction, to the scaffolds I offer them. There is no such thing as a 'typical' kid."

Bob thus came to the FOS project with considerable understanding of the language and concepts of standards documents, but with less background in the myriad concrete and variable actions and interactions that teaching and learning really comprise. By introducing Bob to an inquiry-oriented professional development experience, the FOS project enabled him to begin deepening his practical knowledge by tying together concepts from standards documents, teaching, and learning.

Janice Jensen

At the time of our study, Janice Jensen had been teaching for 12 years in a large elementary school on the rural fringe of a large city. She is a reading resource teacher, working with 1st and 2nd graders whom she describes as being "the farthest away" from grade level standards. Her students and their families—nearly all of whom speak Spanish or Hmong—live in near-desperate poverty, some homeless or without electricity, many with absent parents. At her school there have been an unusually high turnover of administrators. A number of teachers have been there for 20 or 30 years, and Janice feels they are reluctant to change or "take risks." The school has gone from a regular 9-month year, to year-round on multiple tracks, and back again to a "modified" traditional schedule, with each change causing confusion. When she joined the FOS project, Janice had been involved with her local writing project site for two years. At the writing project she had joined a study group for K-3 teachers that was working to create writing lessons that reflected state standards, so she was familiar with California's standards.

As a reading specialist in a pullout program, Janice had found the state standards only peripherally relevant. She aimed at what she called a "baseline of minimal skills" that her students needed to get back into their regular classroom. For her inquiry in the FOS project, Janice decided to take the writing standards seriously as a guide to what she should be aiming her own students toward, even in her special reading program. She said she felt responsible for "examining the standards my peers are held to" in their regular classrooms, rather than just the reading program "markers" she usually aimed at. She wanted to learn about how her teaching of these students would change as a result of her paying close attention to the state standards.

With her 2nd graders, Janice focused her instruction on the 2nd grade state standard for descriptive writing, even though she felt her students were not yet up to even 1st grade standards. She selected a Hmong child from a very poor family as the focus of her case study for the FOS project. As she devised lessons and assessed the child's work throughout the year, Janice found herself "shooting for the basics of letter formation and other Special Ed markers—but also a lot more." Ultimately, Janice felt that her student would not reach the same level of performance as mainstream 2nd graders, but that she was getting farther than she

would have: “She is starting to understand what drafting is about, and what stories are, and I’m watching her risk-taking grow."

By focusing on the state standard, Janice believed she “pushed this girl farther than I would have pushed her before. We’re both stretching. She won’t master the standard, but I’m helping her reach more than I would have in my usual job capacity." Janice remains concerned that her student’s progress will remain invisible with respect to state assessment. However, Janice is excited that she, the student, and the student’s family can all see—by looking at the work she produced over time—how much her writing skills, as well as her overall confidence and joyfulness as a student, were able to grow.

Helen Cho

At the time of our FOS interviews Helen had been teaching 23 years in a large urban district – the last ten years as a middle school language arts teacher. Helen was experienced with both her local writing project and with teacher research through the NWP Urban Sites Network. Her school had changed much during her years there. It is no longer “a neighborhood school”; rather, the majority of students are bussed in as part of the district’s desegregation plan. Today the school population is predominantly multi-racial and multi-lingual. As the student demographics have shifted, the “GATE population" has transferred out of the school according to Helen, leaving it with ever-decreasing test scores and teetering on the edge of Title 1 status.

As a respected veteran teacher, Helen had also been involved in “standards work" in her district. She had served on her district’s middle school project team, working to align the state standards with the literature program the district had adopted. She had led workshops on the standards for other middle school teachers, and had also worked with a team of teachers at the State Department of Education, looking at the alignment of performance standards, Harcourt Brace materials, and the SAT 9 test. Helen believed that state standards are important, but she felt increasingly that “test scores" had ambushed the standards movement in her district: “The whole focus is on raising the test scores. Ideally it should come through the standards, but it doesn’t really work that way ... you don’t see a portfolio, or a writing sample. It’s all just a score. At our school we have a lot of students in the lower quartile of the SAT 9, so there is a lot of pressure to get those test scores up. The pressure comes from the district, in a kind of domino effect.”

Helen’s inquiry topic for FOS reflected a strong, experienced teacher caught in the crossfire between her own convictions and the overwhelming pressures teachers at her school faced to improve their students’ test scores. Because of those pressures her department adopted a scripted remedial reading program, which Helen was reluctant to embrace because she saw it “basically as a workbook program," and one which addressed “only about half" of the long list

of middle school language arts standards. Her research question, "How do I get students to transfer workbook skills into real writing?" was the heart of the dilemma Helen faced as a sophisticated teacher with highly evolved personal and professional standards. Adding to the challenge she faced was the lack of time for writing in her classes. "I have much less time for writing now. I haven't done as many writing process kinds of papers with my students, and I haven't had the time to do the projects that demonstrate a full range of a students' understanding. I've been very limited to routine kinds of teaching because of our reading program."

As part of her FOS project, Helen spent time observing her students work and interviewing them about their reactions to their new language arts program. When we interviewed her in early spring, she told us that her students liked working in the workbook. They didn't have to work too hard, or to do too much homework. And in fact, their scores from pre- and post-testing on the STAR had also improved. But for Helen, these seemed like empty victories. "The kids are improving on their test scores, but as I look at their writing, it's shown very little improvement. What the kids say, and what I see are in conflict."

Toward the end of the year, Helen felt that her students had become so bored by the reading workbooks that many were skipping class or not doing the assignments, and began "acting out." Also, she felt that she did not learn enough about "what makes her students tick" from the workbook answers. Helen ultimately re-introduced parts of her curriculum for writing. But the year ended with her feeling regretful because she had not "reached" her students as writers. She also felt that because her students had not produced a hefty body of written work by the end of the year (as they would have in her writing program), they would be further stigmatized as "low-level" students.

Lourdes Scott

Lourdes attended the writing project summer institute as a second year teacher. With no previous experience in teacher research, she joined the FOS group in year two of the project and in year four of her own teaching career. During the spring of 2000 when we interviewed FOS participants she taught 9th grade language arts in a large junior high school in a small city in Washington, serving only 8th and 9th grade students, 80% of whom qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Lourdes, like almost all the participants from her writing project site, had a very positive relationship with the state standards. Even as a novice she was involved with intensive efforts at her school and district to implement standards-based reforms, serving on a committee to set benchmarks for the 4th and 8th grades, and supporting the adoption of the Six Trait Assessment at her school which "links well with the WASL." She saw herself as one of the "new thinkers" on her school staff, which was largely polarized between younger, less experienced teachers

who promoted standards-based reform, and a group of older teachers who were much less enthusiastic.

Lourdes' research question – *How can I use writing portfolios and Writing Workshop to prepare my students for the inevitable WASL?* – falls into that category of inquiries favored by new teachers beginning to build an instructional repertoire. For her the FOS project served as a forum where the beginning teachers, who comprised the bulk of the group from her site, came together "as colleagues to bounce ideas off one another." Lourdes' community of peers in the FOS project not only helped her articulate budding ideas about what to teach and why, but also served as a support group, helping her "trust her instincts," and to find the courage to accomplish "one of the bolder things I've done":

"When I was first hired (as a teacher) I felt defeated because I was rushing through a very prescribed curriculum, trying to cover too many topics, and ending up doing it all superficially ... I began to think about what to do... if you want good readers, read. If you want good writers, write. So, I went back to the standards for guidance. They are very open-ended, very inclusive. They gave me the courage to do what I thought was right to do, and it was then that I instituted the writing portfolios and writing workshop in my classes. And it has worked for me. Last year I was so impressed with the growth of the kids. They knew it, and I knew it."

In Lourdes' case, then, the Washington State standards served both to challenge her, and to support her efforts in meeting the challenge. For this young teacher they portrayed an instructional ideal toward which she strove. At the same time, as she stepped beyond the boundaries of the traditional curriculum, toward developing her own instructional interpretations, the standards provided legitimization for her risk-taking efforts. "The standards gave me the strength of my own convictions."

Joan Spaulding

Joan Spaulding came to the FOS project with 21 years of high school teaching experience, all in a very large urban district. She is also a long-time teacher-consultant with her writing project site. As part of the writing project, Joan carried out teacher research studies and also participated in the NWP's Urban Sites Network, which promoted inquiry into educational equity. Joan's school enrolls 2,000 African American and Latino students. The dropout rate is high, college-going rate is low, and there is very frequent administrator turnover. Since Joan's department began accumulating ever more writing project fellows, their language scores have been rising. Joan believes that most teachers in her school "take standards seriously"; however, there was confusion at the time of the FOS project about what "standards-based teaching" meant because her district's standards and the state standards were not the same, "even though there [was] a district memo that says they [were]."

As a veteran with accumulated experience and refined individual standards, Joan does not automatically assume that the state standards are the best guide to her practice; however, she feels professionally responsible for knowing the state standards and for making informed judgments about what value they hold for her. She feels that her students need to "show" that they can meet state standards, and she helps her students "interpret what the standards are asking for " by, as one example, teaching them the skills they need to perform well on the UC Subject A writing exam. But on the whole, Joan is not a fan of the state standards documents because she feels they would "limit" her if she only taught what the state standards require. She is especially not a fan of California's assessment system because "the multiple choice testing format and on-demand writing component can not accurately measure attainment of those standards." She believes that a portfolio process that captures a range of student work over time is the only reasonable way to assess improvement in writing. For her FOS inquiry, Joan planned to select two students who were "farthest from meeting standards" and examine their progress as she exposed them to regular 11th grade curriculum. Their writing portfolios became her primary assessment, allowing her to judge student progress toward meeting the standards and the effectiveness of her teaching.

Joan says that doing teacher research makes her "more conscious" of her methods for teaching and assessing students. She becomes more systematic in examining student work: "I take more time to look at their whole process, not just the final products. I analyze their writing carefully and record my observations in a notebook. I interview students to find out how they think and what they feel about writing. Then I sit and think about the data. Often this process of observing, analyzing, interviewing and reflecting causes me to make changes in my practice. All my students benefit. Not just the ones in the study."

As an experienced and confident veteran, then, Joan responds to the state standards as one element in a noisy and politically charged education environment. However, her individual working standards—forged in the classroom and the writing project—are what motivate and guide her teaching practice; and close study of her students' work is what teaches her about the effectiveness of her practice.

Lessons from these inquiries

We can glean a number of useful insights from these teachers' accounts:

- **We are reminded of the reality that enacting policy in classrooms requires tremendous interpretive effort**. School-teaching is an particular enterprise: particular teachers interact in particular ways with particular students (who vary in many ways) at particular moments to address particular problems and aims. In contrast, public policy standards mask the particulars and the variation because they serve the purpose of establishing a uniform vision. These FOS teachers reveal

themselves to be goal-oriented problem-solvers within powerful and specific contexts—not implementers of a single vision of achievement. This is the case even in Washington, where there was greater consistency in teachers' view of standards and more internal coherence in the state's approach to standards than in California.

- **Teachers with different backgrounds and who teach in different educational contexts interact with state standards in different ways. The FOS project enabled these varied individuals to connect standards to teaching in ways that were productive for them.** Teachers in Washington more readily embraced the state standards because some well-regarded professionals had a hand in creating them, because the state was beginning to install an assessment system that teachers felt would be reasonably consistent with the standards, and because there was considerably less policy "noise" around standards in that state. In California, teachers agreed to take the state standards seriously; however, they tended to do this less out of belief in their goodness and their value, and more out of professional responsibility in the face of political reality.

In California, furthermore, teachers' inquiry projects highlight the more pronounced chasm between the rhetoric of standards-based reform and the practices or implementation of standards than there was in Washington. Most California teachers felt that the emphasis on raising test scores—and doing so on tests that were not designed to document growth in writing—was undermining the intent and value of the standards. As one teacher put it, "The whole focus is on raising the test scores. Ideally it should come through the standards, but it doesn't really work that way." This question of whether state standards and assessment systems are congruent is important because of the tendency—true in both states—for assessment to drive local priorities more forcefully than state standards.

Additionally, the profiles show that teachers at different points in their careers have different professional development needs and inclinations related to standards. Teachers who were newer in their careers tended to use FOS as a personal "R & D" effort to build a repertoire of practice—to identify gaps in curriculum, to invent and test new lessons, to test the robustness of their own expectations. The standards served as inspiration, guide and reference point in this process. For the newer teachers in Washington especially, the state standards were influential in shaping their individual working standards during their formative years as professionals. This may be an ideal role for high quality standards to play. Still, as one teacher pointed out, "The standards don't help you achieve them." The professional community and support structures of the FOS project helped teachers in building bridges from the standards to classroom practice.

Teachers who were experienced veterans with a vast repertoire of practice and well-developed professional standards, in contrast, tended to use the FOS project as an

opportunity to "test" the state's standards against their own. If the standards stood up to this test, then these veterans quite willingly regarded them as a resource that could support improved teaching.

- **As the teachers probed more deeply into the work of their most intriguing students, implications for student achievement of standards became far from straightforward.** We can infer that students of FOS teachers were gaining access to new curriculum units and new instructional strategies, including some lessons specifically about standards and assessment criteria. And students who were the subjects of case studies certainly gained more individualized attention from the teacher. In some classrooms, teachers were becoming more aware of the benefits of making students' progress visible both to the student and to their families. However, in one teacher's school, standards took a back seat to assessment of reading and thus the students had no opportunity to demonstrate writing improvement in relation to standards. Another teacher used standards to "stretch" her practice, which in turn stretched a child's writing development, but not to the extent that it will reflect well against a common standard. Even for those teachers who used state standards as the guiding light to create new lessons, real payoff in terms of student learning may accrue gradually as the teachers and their repertoires mature. These profiles help us appreciate the complexity and ambiguity inherent in the notion of "student achievement of standards."

Key design features that supported teachers' inquiries

On the surface this work was designed in the same way as that of the first year. What was different this year was that the participants had a year's experience with FOS under their belts—they came into this year having uncovered interesting teaching problems, having gained analytic tools and a clearer understanding of the project's goals, and also having become more habituated to the principles of the NWP. Additionally, the project coordinator provided stronger direction to the facilitators this year. This included helping them move their groups along a joint timeline, offering suggestions for how to use their group meeting time, and providing them with strategies and tools they could use to facilitate teachers' inquiry processes. The coordinator and others in the project who were experienced with teacher research gleaned these strategies from their local NWP teacher research programs. In an important way, then, this phase of work was more clearly recognizable as an inquiry-based professional development experience that was infused with NWP principles and practices, and that drew from NWP professional development resources and techniques.

Professional development component 5
Making Meaning from Inquiries

In this section, we depart somewhat from the format we have been following. After describing the sequence of activities during the summer meeting, we offer general observations about how they supported teacher learning and about what teachers learned. We then conclude this section, and the body of the report, with in-depth portrayals of two teachers' inquiries. We believe there is no better way to capture and communicate the nature of rigorous inquiry as a form of professional development than to offer these accounts. Also, we believe there is no better way to illustrate the lessons that can be learned from such inquiries—lessons for the inquirers themselves, and lessons for observers with an interest in supporting the improvement of teaching and learning.

The activity

The last formal phase of the FOS project took place during the summer of 2000, when the participants produced draft written reports of their inquiries. This component involved analysis of and writing about the evidence they had collected about teaching and learning—i.e., making meaning from their inquiries. It also involved making their conclusions and lessons learned more public and more explicit by sharing them with the whole group.

The design of this week-long summer meeting was built on some of the most fundamental principles of the NWP—that teachers of writing must write, that they must be members of communities of writers, and that the process of writing is a one of discovery, formulation, clarification, and communication of ideas. The meeting gave FOS participants a variation on a core professional development experiences offered by the NWP—that of being in a writing group. The work of a writing group is designed to address both challenges—to help writers discover and develop ideas and also to communicate them to others.

On the first afternoon, participants were given time to work on the draft write-ups of their studies, as well as access to computers and printers. On the second day, the project coordinator gave them guidance for their initial work in response groups, where they would read one another's papers for the first time, discuss them, and offer feedback. For these groups, participants were assigned to one of 11 groups of three or four on the basis of common approaches they had taken to, or themes within, their inquiries. These included, for example, focuses on development of student voice and choice, on the development of very young emergent writers, on the benefits of teaching students *about* the standards, on portfolios as assessment, on the "mosaic" of strategies that can support or reflect standards, on the conditions teachers face in schools that

prevent a focus on standards in teaching, and on case studies of individual students. These groups met throughout much of the day, focusing primarily on the content of their work: What were their inquiries about? What student samples best illustrated their ideas? What were they learning? What did they have to say about standards with respect to teaching and learning? The participants also had some time in the afternoon to work on their own papers, applying what they were learning from their response groups.

The third day included response groups also. Additionally, two publications staff members from the NWP gave presentations on approaches to revising their work for readers and to making a inquiry project publishable. As was the case for each day, computers and printers were available in the evening, and the participants talked, read, and wrote well into the night. On the fourth day, the group took advantage of the cultural significance of their surroundings by taking a tour of the Immigration Station on Angel Island. A few of the teachers' lives and many of their students' lives have direct connections to Angel Island as well as its counterpart in the east, Ellis Island—connections that are ever-present in writing classrooms and thus an important element of the contexts for teaching writing. The participants also met in their writing groups and had time to write on this day. On the fifth and final day, participants divided into different groups and shared what they had been writing with others. They also collectively discussed lessons learned from the study and met in site-specific groups to begin making plans for how to carry on standards-related professional development work at their sites.

This professional development format—an extended writers' workshop—enabled teachers at different stages in the process of making meaning from their inquiries to make progress. Those who came to the meeting feeling that they were drowning in piles of student writing left with a clearer sense of what their studies could teach them and an approach to putting it in writing. Those who came with a draft left with an improved version and, for some, the assistance they needed to carry it further along a track toward publication. All of them felt they pushed their thinking to the limit by forming ideas in writing, getting reactions from readers, and continuing to write and revise.

Insights that teachers gained from this experience

A number of teachers noted that focusing on student writing analytically gave them far deeper insight than they could gain from performance-based writing assessments, and also much more insight than they could gain from their usual routine of grading papers. One accomplished veteran teacher in California said, for example, that the FOS inquiry project moved her to "look really closely" at her teaching practices and her students' writing, enabling her to "see things I didn't notice before." This enabled her to "change my teaching based on what I see in their writing."

For teachers in the formative stages of their careers, the “making meaning" stage of the FOS project served primarily to deepen their own internalization of the state standards and criteria. One early-career teacher, for example, said she gained confidence that her assessment of student writing is consistent with state standards. Another early-career teacher said that both she and her students know the EALRs inside out.

Several of the more experienced veterans in Washington—those whose professional standards were well honed and often consistent with the state’s—cited WASL criteria, along with their independent judgments, to validate teaching approaches they believe helped students improve their skills and their control over the composing process. These are examples of classroom practices they identified:

- using oral discussion and informal writing about literature to build writing skills and reading comprehension;
- teaching students to self-assess writing (usually against a version of the “6 traits" used in the WASL writing assessment) to provide diagnostic information for the teacher, as well as to develop students’ test-taking skills;
- emphasizing assignments where students write for different audiences;
- using more explicit scaffolding for pre-writing and composing;
- using journal writing to create community and confidence among children in transitional circumstances (such as homeless populations or new immigrants);
- developing writing prompts that offer a combination of structure and choice

A good number of teachers focused on the teaching and learning of students who were below the grade level standard. Across these studies, there are some themes in what teachers learned and in the insights they gained. First, some teachers documented improvements in writing toward standards; however, the teachers’ reflections on this improvement were nearly always tempered by the realization that for the great majority of students, improvement did not yet equate to attaining the standard. And further, the standards themselves offered precious little assistance to these teachers, beyond the function of holding out the public’s expectation as an ideal. Even in Washington, where the teachers felt the standards (and assessment criteria) were more useful as guides, teachers knew their limits: “The standards do not tell us *how* to help our students achieve the skills and knowledge they ask for. We have to figure that out ourselves." In a number of their papers, FOS teachers refer to “the Writing Project" as the best place to do the figuring out—and clearly many of them used FOS for that purpose.

Teachers making meaning from inquiry – two cases

The above overview gives a general flavor of how FOS teachers approached their inquiries and of what lessons they began to draw from them. It also underscores the way in which the FOS project supported a wide variety of teachers in making thoughtful and informed use of standards as a guide and resource for teaching. It does not, however, fully explicate the nature of "rigorous and systematic inquiry" as a professional development experience, nor does it reveal what "learning from student work" can entail, and can mean, for teachers. Below we describe two FOS teachers' inquiries—their in-depth and intensive meaning-making and problem-solving related to their students' work, their teaching practice, and standards.

Both are in California, both are experienced as teachers and as teacher-researchers, and both are veterans of their Writing Project sites. In different ways, and amid very different teaching conditions, they dug deeply into the work of students who are "low-performing" with respect to state standards. In offering these accounts, we mean to underscore the value to teachers of having time and professional support for doing the problem-solving that teaching requires. We also mean to uncover some of the invisible realities of what teaching actually involves.

Ellen Pringle

Without a trace of either humor or sarcasm, but as a matter of fact, Ellen Pringle describes the schools in her urban district as "horrible." She teaches approximately 170 11th graders (5 periods a day, four classes in junior English—one of which is an honors section--and one in public speaking) at her high school. "Since I started teaching here 13 years ago, we've had seven different superintendents, and at my school we have had five principals in the past ten years." Her school is a Title One school, where every student receives a reduced or free lunch. According to Ellen, 93% of the students come from families which receive AFDC; over half of the students qualify for special education programs, such as ESL classes or RSP services; and over twenty-seven different languages are spoken by students at the school.

Not surprisingly her school rated a "1" out of a possible "10" on the comparison score on the California's Academic Performance Index (API). As an illustration of the dysfunctionality of her school and district, Ellen tells the story of how the school hoped to improve its API rating. The administration decided that the school should focus effort on improving students' test-taking abilities. The district struck an agreement whereby the students would serve to "norm the test," and the district would receive $2.50 for every completed student test. According to Ellen, "Our students took the Metropolitan test four different times during the year ... each time it was exactly the same test. We were given the results only once however, so that it was impossible to see any growth over time, or to learn anything about student progress. In addition, of course, we had to take the regular Stanford 9, which takes

approximately 7 hours to administer ...All told we lost 30 hours of instructional time, that's almost 20 class periods, to color-in-the-bubble testing this year."

The professional culture at her high school mirrors the isolation of the dispersed layout of the school's campuses, the harried quality of its crowded classrooms, and the district's chronic cost-cutting efforts. In spite of the vestiges of a cadre of writing project teachers who flourished in the English Department over a decade ago, Ellen paints a somber-toned picture of the kinds of professional conversations that occur among teachers at her school today. Particularly in contrast to the vibrant teacher collaborations that once centered around the California Assessment Program (CAP) when Ellen first became a teacher, but which have steadily eroded over the last decade, professional interactions are scant. Back then teachers in her department were released from class to meet with others from around the district to score writing proficiency tests. Later however, substitutes became hard to get and eventually the district refused to pay for them altogether, so that teachers were forced to meet and score together on Saturdays. But still, according to Ellen, the net result was that "We had an effective writing assessment program in place, and at least the English teachers would use this as the basis for discussing the teaching of writing." The district's increasing unwillingness to support the administration and scoring of the writing proficiency culminated during the last year of the Focus On Standards project in the suspension of the district writing proficiency "the morning the test was to be given." Today then, "except for discussing the logistics of administering the SAT-9, there hasn't been any effort by the district to provide professional time for teachers to talk about any kind of standards."

In 1994 as a relatively new teacher in the strongly writing project influenced English Department at her high school, Ellen participated in the invitational institute of her local writing project site. "It totally made the difference in my teaching." Since 1994 she has participated extensively with her writing project site, beginning with an assessment workshop, and including several years of participation in a special program that focuses on the teaching of academic writing in high school, several years of teacher research, and culminating with her co-facilitation of the FOS project. There is no doubt that the writing project has been a life-saver for Ellen, serving as a supportive professional home where she can make sense of the myriad forces which converge in her classroom.

Why Ellen's case?

A key aspect of what makes Ellen's case useful in understanding the Focus on Standards project as a professional development model is the less than ideal circumstances in which she teaches. She represents teachers in the most challenging circumstances. Stepping into Ellen's classroom we are immediately immersed in the disturbing realities of a very troubled (but unfortunately, not unique) urban high school. It is not an exaggeration to say that almost none of Ellen's students are meeting the 11th grade writing standards. The majority of her students fall somewhere, invisibly, below. They are, literally, sub-standard.

Through her we see how a good teacher responds to the dilemma identified by another FOS participant, namely that "The standards don't help you achieve them." Ellen explains her challenge in her own words: "I don't think people see teaching as problem solving in terms of curriculum. But if I were an electrician and, for example, I went into my house where the electricity blew yesterday, I would have to problem-solve. I would have to say, okay, why isn't this electricity working? If I were to look at this outlet, and say, this outlet keeps blowing, how do I have to rewire something to make this work? I don't think the public thinks of teaching and developing curriculum in that way. They think, okay – get into that room, shut the door, and when you come out we want this kid to have gone from here to there. I don't think they understand all the things that we, as teachers, need to take into consideration."

Ellen's comment underscores what many other FOS teachers expressed, namely, that what is publicly visible vis à vis student progress is only the "bottom line," whether "the electricity is on or off," whether students are meeting the standards or not. What remains frustratingly invisible, teachers say, is the complicated and work-intensive processes that must occur in order for their work and the work of their students to become visible. Because her students don't meet the standards, teaching for Ellen means not only figuring out "the why not," identifying where the problems reside; but also figuring out "the how to," inventing ways of how to fix the problems.

Ellen 's FOS inquiry is a story of problem-solving, of burrowing ever deeper into the reasons her students can not achieve particular writing standards. Her inquiry is also a story of design and construction, of crafting curriculum and instruction in carefully placed blocks to serve as a bridge between the standards and her students.

Ellen's inquiry and what she learned

The FOS project offered Ellen the opportunity to examine closely the California Language Arts Content Standards, which she had not done previously. "When I examined my own personal and professional standards and compared them to the state standards, I found that some of the expectations mirrored my own." In particular the following standards made sense to Ellen: *(1.0) Writing Strategies: Students will write coherent and focused texts that convey a well-defined perspective and tightly reasoned argument. The writing demonstrates the students' awareness of the audience and purpose and progression throughout the stages of the writing process,* and a sub-set, (1.3), *... students will be able to structure ideas and arguments in a sustained, persuasive, and sophisticated way and support them with precise and relevant examples.*

It is important to note that the state standards first had to pass muster with Ellen, a mid-career teacher who in the 13 years she had been teaching had already developed a sound and coherent set of personal and professional standards, established in great part through interactions with colleagues in her department and in the writing project. "Before the state standards came along, my own standards were shaped by the skills I knew students would need to write their college 'I-Search' research paper

the second semester, to pass their senior English class, to pass the district writing proficiency test, to write college essays, and to write in the business world." In fact Ellen structures her instructional program to meet her own standards. "Every year I plan my assignments so they move students along a continuum of increasingly demanding thinking and writing tasks, and I see this progression of tasks in a linear way. Even though I may have to review and re-teach a skill, like writing a strong thesis statement, or smoothly blending quotations, or adding adequate analysis, I am always moving ahead with the writing."

Ellen began her FOS inquiry at the nexus of where her personal and professional standards, the state standards, and her instructional program converged. She chose to focus on her work with her 3rd period class. (At the beginning of the year she had 35 students in this class, and by the end of the year 12 had transferred out for various reasons, and 4 others had transferred in to make a total of 27 at the end of the year. Of those 27, 7 were African-American, 9 Asian, 4 Latino, 2 Pacific Islanders, and 4 were white. One was a special education student and 14 of the students were English Language Learners). Within the overall thrust of her instructional program: "I see the junior year as time to expand their writing repertoire, help students transition from mostly narrative writing to the more analytical writing they will be expected to do in the upper grades and in college." Through her FOS inquiry she hoped to shed light on the question of what instructional scaffolding is necessary to move students through this progression, selecting students (both ELL and native speakers) whose work would represent the class.

Ellen's inquiry paper narrates how her "tightly knit plans" for the year were "unraveled" by the realities of the needs of her students. It is impossible to relate the whole story here. However, what we can do is to explicate the dynamic pattern of problem-solving that emerged between teacher, students, and their writing as Ellen and her class strove to meet the standards that served as a backdrop to the whole endeavor, and which repeated itself again and again during the course of the school year.

The pattern goes something like the following—

Ellen begins the transition from narrative writing, with which she feels fairly confident her students are familiar and proficient, to analytical writing with a quick diagnostic activity in September. At this early stage she is interested in learning about her students' reading comprehension and note-taking ability to see if they are ready for the demands of the "Subject A"[21] essay, where students must read and respond to a non-fiction article or essay. She assigns the class an essay to read, and asks them to take notes according to a format she had taught them very early in the year. Afterwards, as Ellen reads through the students' work, their notes and their

[21] The "Subject A" test is the writing exam the University of California uses to place students in regular freshman composition or a "remedial" course. It is designed so that both reading and writing skills are required.

summaries of the article, she is surprised to learn that many of her students did not completely understand the article. Their notes are sketchy, and their summaries are simplistic and vague.

To illustrate what Ellen confronted after this assignment, a section of a paragraph from the assigned essay, "My Own Son Didn't Listen," a personal essay written by Carolyn Hanig for the My Turn column in *Newsweek*, follows.

> Based on my first hand experience, I tried to drill into my four children the importance of wearing seat belts. When Nik was learning to drive, I had him take a driver's ed course sponsored by my auto insurance company. We even made a visit to a young man recovering in an intensive care unit who is now a quadriplegic because he wasn't wearing his seat belt.
>
> I did everything I could think of to get Nik to buckle up. Unfortunately, the threat of serious injury or even death is not enough to persuade some people -- especially young people, who believe they are invincible – to always buckle up.

The following are the response summaries from Ellen's three sample students:

> "Talked about how she went through different people died in her family. Also how she took her children to places to learn about safety."
>
> "It explains seatbelts and their purpose."
>
> "She shown her son to an accident victim."

The pattern for the year continues with Ellen's diagnosis. "As surprised as I was to read such ineffective summaries as these, I figured the poor quality of their work had more to do with not taking enough time with the text, and more to do with a lack of motivation than a lack of comprehension. After all, the vocabulary of the piece was not that demanding, and the passage included quite a bit of narrative, a structure with which they were familiar. We discussed the article and the importance of taking our time when reading and taking good notes. Now I knew we were ready to move on to another writing assignment, and keep on track with my plan of assignments for the year."

But, as Ellen continues her narrative, we learn from her that she has misdiagnosed the source of the problems her students are having. It is not simply a lack of motivation, or, as she thought, their unwillingness to work in a thoughtful way. In fact her prescriptions have failed to help them with the next assignment, writing a timed "Subject A" essay. She must look and think again, and more intensely each time, to try to understand what her students do not know. She describes a series of next attempts at analyzing the aspects of the skills and abilities her students lack in order to craft a series of instructional scaffolds that will help them learn what she thinks is missing for them. Perhaps, she hypothesizes, brainstorming in class about the aspects of the major theme in the essay would help students understand it. Or, perhaps, reading out loud each passage in the essay, and discussing it in class, would help individuals extract personal meaning from it. We also learn from her that none of these remedies seems to help very much.

Ellen's inquiry paper describes the cycle of assignments, student work, her reading and interpretation of the work, her diagnosis of where to go next in her instruction, and her carefully crafted prescriptions to remedy the deficiencies she finds and struggles to understand. The deeper she goes, the more she sees.

Finally, mid-year, "The notion faintly crept into my mind that perhaps students were not reading critically enough because they didn't know how to read for understanding. Perhaps they didn't know what to do when they read." She continues, "As embarrassing as it is to admit, I thought the reading would just improve along the way all by itself. I didn't think of it happening miraculously. I just thought the improvement was a natural consequence of our efforts to improve writing. As a result of this final realization, I had to rethink my whole approach to teaching and my scaffolding of curriculum. I had to back away from the writing of analytical essays and focus on effective reading strategies and ways to improve reading comprehension. To ignore this vital need would have been like continuing on a trip knowing the final destination would always be out of reach."

So here we see a strong, conscientious teacher who, by a rigorous examination of her own practice and what her students work tells her, has discovered a wall of sorts. "Once I decided to focus on reading comprehension, I panicked. I didn't have any curriculum developed for this." Ellen does not stop here of course, although it is sobering to consider the number of teachers who might legitimately give up at this point. She starts the problem-solving process anew. Her thinking sheds light on how her standards, her understanding of her students' needs, and her own thinking about constructing targeted curriculum interplay. "I reasoned that in order to help all my students I had to start with the most basic reading assignments. I didn't want to revert to reading fiction, because one of my goals was to get them used to working with non-fiction texts. I also figured that a short piece of non-fiction could be as accessible as a short piece of fiction ... so, we moved gradually from short, very accessible pieces of high interest, like the Letters to the Editor in *Teen Magazine*, to longer, more difficult pieces. I didn't start out with a particular plan, but I found that I was scaffolding my reading comprehension assignment the same way as I do my writing assignments. The principles that have guided my personal and professional standards for writing were the same ones that were influencing my curriculum planning and shaping my standards for reading comprehension."

Ellen's FOS inquiry does not conclude in a neat and tidy way. Rather, it ends as the school year ended for her. "Although some of my students did experience some success in reading, I am still not sure how to address a lack of reading comprehension and a lack of engagement with the text." She did not solve the problem conclusively.

However, she did understand the nature of the problem more fully and deeply. "Teaching students how to write an essay based on text that meets the standards involves more than just teaching writing. Students need to know how to read a piece of non-fiction. They have to be able to pull out the most important points,

summarize the main idea, and find a way to connect the reading to themselves and the world around them. Only then can they write an effective and persuasive essay. I started out my year with the intention of following my yearlong plan to improve writing. I wanted to teach and see students blossom as analytical thinkers and writers. Instead, I spent the year learning one valuable lesson after another. I wanted my students to be more reflective and be engaged in their writing. Instead, I became much more reflective and engaged in my struggle to adapt my teaching and curriculum to the needs of my students."

What we learned from Ellen and her inquiry

The standards rhetoric teachers perceive in the environment surrounding them in their workplace follows a logic that goes something like this—develop high quality standards for what students should know and be able to do, have teachers implement the standards, assess students' achievement against the standards, and then, when all components of the system are aligned, students will meet the standards.

Ellen's Focus On Standards inquiry exposes the complexities of a standards-based instructional cycle. These lie hidden beneath the simplicity of the public rhetoric. In fact, the uncovering and discovery of her own assumptions vis à vis standards provides plot and drama to Ellen's inquiry. Many features of the reality of standards-based teaching and learning are revealed through her work, but three aspects in particular stand out.

First, there is Ellen's discovery that "the emperor is wearing no clothes." Specifically she describes in her paper how students came to her in the 11th grade without having met the standards in previous grades. "I didn't realize that a lot of students are not prepared to do analytical writing when they come to me, and I don't understand that. When you follow the state standards or any kinds of standards, the assumption is that the kids have met all of the standards they are supposed to meet when they get to you. Well, they haven't." This basic assumption, that students enter school in the fall having accomplished the standards from previous grades, is a lynchpin both to the standards argument and to the way the educational system is, in theory, intended to work. It is held so strongly, and by so many, that even a thoughtful 13-year teaching veteran, like Ellen, is surprised to learn it isn't so. The reality, that students are not prepared, is difficult to accept because it may mean a radical reconstruction of practice for a teacher. Ellen continues, "I would just tell the kids that junior year is hard, and I really believed that junior year was made harder because the kids don't have enough non-fiction reading, and they don't have enough analytical writing practice, or even experiences talking that way. Up until a few years ago, I didn't realize there was that large a gap. I just thought they had the background somewhere, and that all I have to do is pull it out of them. Well, I am not. There is nothing to pull. I was especially caught off-guard by the ELL students. They *never* got analytic writing or even basic writing skills like revision and editing. But I didn't really understand that until recently."

Held up against Ellen's inquiry (where she begins to dig beneath the surface of students' failure to meet the standards), this lynchpin assumption commonly held by teachers and public alike, that grade level standards reflect the pace of student learning, begins to crumble for us as well. Moreover, Ellen's efforts to unearth what her students need to learn demonstrate how important it is to sound and appropriate instruction not to assume that students have met the standards at their grade level.

Secondly, Ellen's work reveals the gap between the first links in the standards logic – between the notion that after the development of the standard, implementation of the standard should readily follow. But we learn from Ellen that "the standards don't help you meet them." Through her story we see a rich example of the kind of construction work and bridge-building teachers must do to span the gap between "the standard" and "implementing the standard" with their students. In fact, Ellen's year-long inquiry reveals how, when a teacher begins with a set of standards, in this case involving analytical writing, only to discover that the majority of students perform well below the standard, she must backtrack and retrofit. She is challenged to discover what her students can do, and figure out what they should be doing next. She must then develop the curriculum and instructional materials in such a way that they not only reflect the internal integrity of the discipline, and keep true to a conceptual developmental sequence, but also are accessible and motivating to her students. All of this hard work is complicated further by the contextual constraints and barriers in which it all occurs. So we once again learn, through Ellen, that having a standard and implementing is not straightforward at all.

Finally Ellen's inquiry illuminates the value and benefits to teachers of the investment in an inquiry-based professional community focused on standards. As she told us, her own well-articulated personal and professional standards were forged through her participation in her local writing project site, as well as through her work within her own department and with the California Assessment Program (CAP), both also heavily influenced by the local writing project. Her standards were developed through numerous and repeated interactions with colleagues about writing, writing assessment, what was meant by particular types of writing, and what those type of writing entailed, as well as ongoing conversations about how to teach, with what activities, and strategies and techniques. Ellen benefited from the legacy of the investment that was made in CAP by the state over a decade ago.

The strength of her personal standards, as well as her participation in the FOS project, enabled Ellen to hold her own against the pressures of the current accountability system within which she works. "Even though the district has not supported a closer look at the state or even the district standards, the local writing project has given me the opportunity to examine standards and their role in my classroom ... In fact, if I had not been involved in the writing project, I don't know how I would have coped with this onslaught of standards, nor do I know how I would have found a way to adapt to this standards-charged, taking-names, and kicking-butt atmosphere of skill-and-drill curriculum and high-stakes testing." As Ellen tells us, at her high school there is "not much conversation about the standards."

Susan Garfield

At the time of the FOS project, Susan Garfield had been teaching for 21 years at the same middle school in a small community outside a city. Susan describes the staff at her school as "very stable and collaborative. My department is really an ideal teacher community." With respect to the school's focus on standards, Susan says "My principal never says 'standards' to me, only SAT 9. The standards are not important in my school because there's no accountability to them, only to the API.[22]" Susan says, though, that the concern about API is "not too bad"; the formal accountability system that really matters in her school, with respect to writing achievement *per se*, is that students must pass the district's writing proficiency test in order to advance to ninth grade. The format of the test—which asks students to compose an essay over the span of 3 class periods—is a holdover from California's CLAS performance assessment for writing, which was in turn a holdover from the CAP performance assessment. Susan feels that the proficiency test is reasonable enough, though she also believes that a student's performance on any given day, on one test, is fundamentally limited as a measure of a student's ability.

Three quarters of the students in her school are Latino. Among the rest, 19% are white, and 5% are Asian. Over the years Susan has noticed that her students enter middle school with diminishing reading and writing skills—"they start farther and farther behind each year. Many of their parents are not literate." Among Susan's 64 students, 70% qualify for free or reduced lunch. About half her students are below the 40th percentile on SAT 9 reading/language scores; there are also a few below the 20th percentile and a handful above the 70th.

Susan is a long-time veteran of the writing project, having joined her site in 1982 and been active as a teacher consultant and site leader since then. Her site received a CWP mini-grant several years ago to start a teacher research program. Susan was involved from the beginning and coordinated her site's TR group for four years; one of her studies was published in the NWP quarterly. At this point in her career, in fact, Susan's primary approach to improving her teaching was to rigorously and systematically study her students' learning: "As a way of making sure I learn something each year, I have written case studies of individual students... By noticing what this single student does, says, and writes, I am more aware of what I'm teaching as compared to what I want to teach, and [aware of] what students are learning, as compared to my hopes for them. By noticing this one student and asking myself why her or she is learning, or not, I become a learner in my own classroom."

In looking over Susan's shoulder, then, we are observing a consummate professional who works in a supportive context, and who has become a real expert at examining and learning from student work. Her explication of the qualities of one student's

[22] The newly created Academic Performance Index, by which schools are rated against other schools on their performance on standardized tests.

writing reveals the complexity of what "progress" and "achievement" really look like for a "low-performing" student. As we see Susan apply both her personal standards and the state standards to Jose's writing, we also gain an experienced teacher's perspective on the multiple relationships between state standards and the teaching and learning of real students.

Susan's inquiry into Jose's development as a writer

Susan chose to study Jose because—after a few weeks of getting to know all her 7th graders—he stood out as a child who was really struggling as a learner and writer, but who had a desire to learn. When we invited Susan to explain to us how she inquired into Jose's writing development, she immediately pulled two photos from her wallet—"this is Jose, and this is Jose with his family." Jose is not "a student," she was telling us—like each one of her 64 students, he is a unique and whole person, he is *Jose.*

The first few weeks of school, Susan learned about Jose as an individual in every way she could. What kind of learner is he? What specific literacy skills does he have? What are his personal interests and sources of motivation for writing? What factors help explain his literacy ability? She watched him interact with other students and with her, and recorded her observations in a journal. She looked at his scores on a wide range of standardized reading assessments, including the SAT 9 and several others. Of these, she says, "The different results from these varied assessments reminded me of something I learned early in my teaching career: no single assessment can describe a student's level of literacy." She also talked to his mother, finding out that Jose had asthma; the effects of his medication, and his need for it, helped explain why his written work could be "written in careful, legible cursive and be completely understandable" on one day and, on a different day, be written in "shaky, uneven manuscript printing" with content that was "jumbled and incoherent." Susan also consulted Jose's teacher from the previous year, from whom she learned more about his classroom work and also about a serious car accident he had been involved in. She went through his cumulative folder, where she learned he had been placed in Special Education off and on. And she carefully studied his work on a series of early-autumn writing assignments that she had designed to enable her students to inform her of their skills and habits related to reading and writing; she recorded detailed analyses of Jose's written pieces in her research journal.

For her FOS inquiry project, Susan did not merely hold Jose's work up against the standards; more importantly to her, she held the State standards up against her own standards to see if they measured up. Did the state standards adequately recognize and describe what Jose was working on and becoming capable of as a writer? Did they constitute a reasonable framework for approaching the teaching of Jose as an individual child? In her written study, Susan says "I wanted to learn about the Standards and evaluate them in relation to a student's work...it's based on the hope that a teacher's response to these particular standards—assessing their benefits to students and teachers and their detrimental effects—might offer a useful insight on the issue of standards."

Susan's analysis of Jose's progress

Susan collected and analyzed all of Jose's writing during the year. She assessed each piece against both her own criteria and against 7th grade State writing standards that were relevant to her assignments; she also assessed his improvement (or not) over time, again with respect to her own goals and those of "the State of California and the standards writers." She produced a draft report for the FOS summer meeting in June 2000 and a revision of it later in the summer. In her report, she uses many samples of Jose's writing, entries from her research journal, and references to specific standards to document Jose's development as a writer and illustrate how and what she learned from studying it.

A few highlights:

Documenting Jose's progress against her own standards. When Susan analyzed Jose's early pieces of writing, she observed that he "is writing down things as they occur to him, a sort of stream-of-consciousness writing...This lack of organization, along with some repetitiveness, indicates that there doesn't seem to be much thought of shaping his ideas for a reader." In Susan's long experience as a teacher, she had developed an understanding that the ability to "shape ideas for a reader" was a core writing skill that encompassed multiple specific skills—e.g., organization of ideas, selection of detail, word choice, and so on: "This awareness of audience is the crucial requirement for growth in writing." In effect, Susan brought a well-honed theoretical framework for writing development to bear on her analysis of Jose's early work—a framework within which she could help Jose improve specific pieces of writing and also help him develop greater awareness of the role of a writer in a writer-reader relationship.

In some of Jose's work later in the year, Susan can identify specific revision choices Jose made that improved the organization of his papers and made them more readable for an audience. "In comparing Jose's rough draft with his final, I notice that he has re-ordered his paragraphs...Next, I noticed that he has deleted, with vigorous pencil strokes, a paragraph...Recognizing this digression, and deleting a whole paragraph, represents accomplishment in revision, especially for a relatively inexperienced writer whose every word is hard won...Given the reluctance of students to revise, I feel that Jose has accomplished something in this area; his changes show evidence of a willingness and an ability to truly 're-see' his paper and make some change to improve organization and increase clarity to a reader."

Jose's development of specific writing skills was very uneven, however; he did not follow anything like a steady trajectory of improvement. He continued to struggle with spelling, and though he improved on some matters of language convention, he still made "usage errors that seem second language problems." At the end of the year, Susan says that "though his progress was by no means steady, and though in some areas he did not improve after the first few months, he did make discernible growth in writing." Using samples from his papers, she cites his ability to organize

expository pieces, write in complete sentences, correct some grammar errors, direct his own revision process, elaborate with detail better, and so on. Though she does not state this in her paper, it is implicit that Jose's trajectory of writing development is one of 64 different trajectories in her classroom, none of them linear.

Susan attributes Jose's growth to a number of factors, including his overall maturation process, as well as help he received from tutors and an aide. With respect to her influence on him, she points to the Writing Project as the "most powerful influence" on her teaching because it gave her an "idea" that governs all of the specifics of her teaching approaches: "The most important idea that has emerged through my Writing Project experiences is that communication and self discovery through writing are as important aspects of being truly human as language itself." But Susan also adapted her teaching approaches to Jose's particular strengths and weaknesses. For example, she found that Jose had difficulty with reading comprehension; by closely observing him, she saw that when he had a chance to talk about what he read before writing about it, his writing was better. She therefore created opportunities for him to do this.

For Susan, what was most important to the teaching of Jose was to help him make as much *progress* as he could; she thus assessed improvement against the individual and internal referent of his own starting point. Susan simultaneously aimed her instruction of Jose at external and standard referent—the standard of the district's proficiency test; she designed several writing assignments as practice for this test. Because the nature of the test was reasonable with respect to her approach to teaching writing, she could "teach to the test" within her own curriculum framework—something she could not do in relation to the SAT 9. Susan's study is a convincing illustration that the task of ascertaining a student's starting point, degree and specific types of progress, and performance ability involves examining *multiple* indicators and samples of work—both internally and externally defined—over time.

Susan's use and assessment of state standards in light of Jose's writing. Unlike some of the less experienced teachers in the FOS project, especially those in Washington state, Susan did not embrace the state standards for 7th grade writing as her main guide to teaching. Rather, she used her analyses of Jose's work (i.e., her own professional standards and the theories of writing that underlie them) as a test of the quality and value of the state standards. And her assessment is mixed. It is important to note, however, that although Susan never says so explicitly, her illustration of Jose's work shows that her writing curriculum was comprehensive with respect to the state's content standards: there are no standards left ignored and no assignment that addresses fewer than 2 or 3 sets of standards.

For every writing assignment Susan gave, she looked for a 7th grade writing standard that seemed relevant to it, and assessed Jose's work against it. Often, this revealed the contrast between Susan's aim of documenting Jose's progress from his starting point and the state standards' aim of establishing a common referent for the grade level. With respect to the "Organization and Focus" standard, for example: "I'm sure the standards writers would dismiss Jose's essay as far removed from the

standards they have set, but I can make a case for organizational structure...Jose supports his claim with examples, though not specific and elaborated." Or for the set of state standards for research reports: "This project, on which we spent a good deal of time, has fallen short of the State's expectations, which are for the most part reasonable. What to make of Jose's project then? I focus on what he has accomplished..." Thus, it is not that Susan does not agree with the common standard; it is just that as Jose's teacher, her orientation is to take note of each incremental step in the right direction. Hers is a learning orientation rather than an achievement orientation. Further, Susan's references to "the standards writers" reveals that she treats the document not as a monolith of policy, but as one of many available written communications aimed at making claims about what schooling should consist of.

There were times when Susan felt that the standards were built from a different conception of the discipline and different theory of how children develop as writers than the theories she had formed from her practice, her professional reading of research, and her work with colleagues. The standards documents often include lists of "appropriate strategies" to teach that Susan thinks are "mixed up."[23] After analyzing the standard for writing narratives, for example, Susan says "I'm not getting any help here as far as creating goals towards which my students can work as they revise."

The standards also reflect fundamental concepts of the discipline in a way that Susan questions. Within the standards for writing in different genres, for example, she says "I think our Standards writers have gone astray by joining fictional and autobiographical in this Standard because two of the sub-standards seem to me to apply only to fictional narratives..." She discusses at length the shortcomings of the "standards writers" in their knowledge of the characteristics of major genres of literature. In her classroom, Susan will address only those aspects of these standards that she believes are true to her discipline.

Susan also believes the documents omit important achievements in the learning of writing—particularly those achievements that acknowledge writing to be a fully human endeavor. She says this about gains Jose made on a research project: "Although...there isn't a trace of bibliographic reference, I consider this little book a success, because I'm remembering how much Jose (with a SAT 9 score of 18) enjoyed reading about something in which he was interested and how proud he was when he could find his own way to the Internet sites...Unfortunately, the Standards don't mention the fun of learning more about an interesting topic or the value of confidence gained in the use of technology."

[23] One common complaint about California's standards was that they consisted of "lists" of content that would be nonsensical to follow as a teacher. Teachers felt that they needed to be re-ordered and combined, which requires deep knowledge of the discipline and of instruction. Standards that need to be "re-constructed" this way obviously have less potential to guide less experienced teachers.

Even after these criticisms, Susan remained open to the possibility that the standards documents could serve as a reminder to her to offer her students certain types of experiences. She realized that in her research report assignment, for example, that she had given her students the topics to choose from so that the students had no opportunity to address the standard of "Pose relevant and tightly drawn questions about the topic," and she resolves to "resurrect a question-based research format" she hasn't used for awhile.

Also, she realizes that analyzing the standards in such depth has made her more articulate and explicit about her practices and the beliefs (and standards) they reflect. "I reflect upon my standards for a research project. I've never written them down before, and perhaps the impetus that the California State Standards have given me to do so is one of the most positive effects of these Standards."

Reflections on teacher inquiry as professional development

Susan's example serves as a "best-case" illustration of how teachers' rigorous and systematic documentation and study of classroom practice and of student work fosters teacher learning. Susan says that the FOS project enabled her to understand the State standards in a way she never would have if she had not applied them to a specific student's work. The project impelled her to "clarify and articulate" her own standards and expectations for her students. It gave her a "deeper and more precise knowledge of Jose, of one student who represents many, and of how he has learned. With each case study I have a stronger sense of what my students and I should be working on and how we should be going about that work."

Susan's study also reveals some important ways in which a specific set of state standards interacts with the standards and practices of a highly professional veteran teacher. Further, Susan's study opens a window onto some of the connections between a set of state standards and the real students to which they refer—particular those students designated as "low-performing." About Jose and the standards, Susan says: "No matter how carefully I describe Jose's progress, his work falls far short of the Standards set forth by the State of California for a seventh grade student....By what do we measure student success?...For me, the answer is clear. Student progress must be as valid a measure of student success as the meeting of 'standards.'" As Jose's case makes clear, to invalidate progress is to invalidate both the teaching and the learning.

Susan's study shines the spotlight on a dilemma inherent in "standards-based reform" and an important limitation of standards as a resource for teachers. There is a fundamental difference in perspective between State standards and the classroom teacher. As public policy documents, standards represent "average" public expectations for the undifferentiated mass of students of a certain age. That is, if standards documents are well-conceived, they can assist teachers in envisioning ideals and end goals. The classroom teacher, however, is interacting with individual students of infinite variety, each of whom moves on a different, and nonlinear, trajectory of development. It is the teachers who must have the capacity—and the

supports—that enable them to understand where there students are developmentally, then understand what to do to move each student from their starting points in incremental degrees toward a common standard.

III. LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE FOS PROJECT

In this final section, we distill key observations and insights we have gained from observing teachers and their work in the FOS project. We have gained these in part from studying the professional development design itself and how it served the participants. We have also gained insight from looking at the teachers' work contexts, and at their sense-making processes, through the teachers'-eye-view window that this professional development design afforded us as observers.

Following these observations we address, by turn, the study's three guiding questions about the effectiveness of the FOS project and its potential to serve as a model of professional development that can contribute to standards-based reform.

The "three-legged stool" that supports teachers' working standards

Teachers are not standards-free, nor do they implement external standards. Rather, in their daily practice teachers apply standards that they have constructed over time. These daily standards may be referred to as teachers' ***individual working standards***. In this study, we observe that there are three major sources and types of standards that can contribute to teachers' working standards:

- **Personal standards from practice and life experience**

Whether they are novices or veterans, teachers bring their own life experiences to bear on the standards they apply in their classrooms; in particular, they bring the personal standards they have derived from the practice of teaching. Teachers formulate personal judgments about what students should and can learn, about the quality of students' performances, and about the level of students' achievement. In the teaching profession in particular—because of its history, structure, and evolved occupational norms—there is real likelihood that personal standards are quite robust for many teachers.[24]

- **Standards of the profession**

Teachers are also influenced by professional standards—those that reflect the best collective judgment and knowledge of those working in the profession.

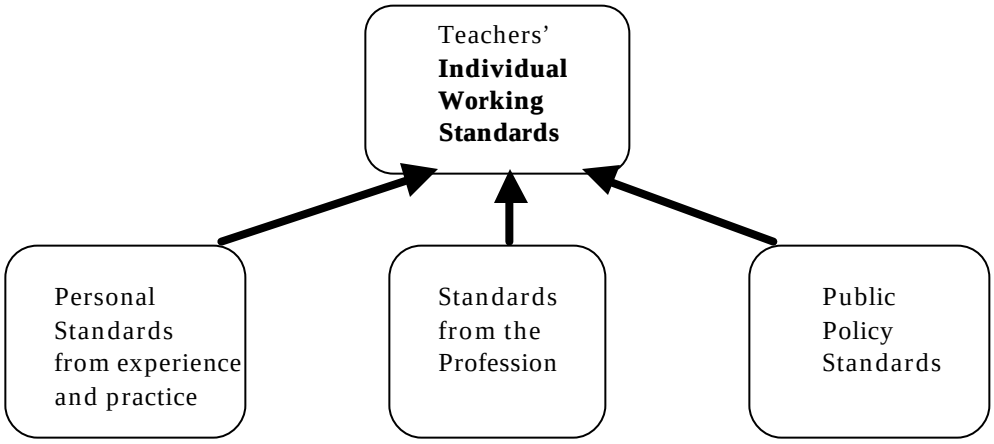
[24] There is a substantial literature on teachers' individualism, much of it spawned from the ground-breaking study by Dan Lortie in 1975: *Schoolteacher* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

Networks such as the NWP offer teachers access to professional standards through interactions with colleagues, research, and other professional publications and resources. Professional networks also create opportunities for practicing teachers to engage in dialogues over time that contribute to the development of professional standards.

- **Public policy standards**

In conversations about reform, the term “standards" usually refers to this source—the formal documents that contain and reflect standards as public policy. These standards are consensus statements reflecting the will of policy-makers and the publics to whom they respond.

We refer to these sources as the “three-legged stool" that comprises and supports a teacher’s individual standards:



The standards from each source may be more or less consistent with one another, depending upon the context in which each evolved. Teachers also develop their own working standards cumulatively over time—so that the strength of any one of “legs" always has potential to grow or diminish.

Some realities about state standards and teaching

In observing teachers’ work in FOS, we gained fresh perspective on a number of realities teachers face in their teaching contexts. We identify these because they help dispel some of the myths embedded in the prevailing rhetoric of standards-based reform, and also help us understand how FOS supported teacher learning.

- **State standards documents are one signal in an environment that is noisy with formal standards.** At any given time, there is a plethora of standards in teachers' environments, often sponsored by institutions that teachers and schools want to respond to. Further, standards documents are issued over time, each one leaving a legacy. Standards vary in quality with respect to their discipline accuracy, their accessibility to teachers, and the impetus that drove their creation. Thus, when any state policy document is issued, it is entering an education environment and a teaching profession that is crowded with formal statements of standards.

- **State standards documents have a perspective that is rightfully different from teachers' perspectives**. Standards documents attempt to describe what the mass of students of a given age and grade level should know and be able to do at a point in time. Standards are abstract, and they identify only the ends and not the means. Teachers, on the other hand, work with specific individuals who vary. And teachers do not teach with abstractions, but rather through myriad actions, large and small. This difference in perspective necessarily puts limits on the role that standards, in and of themselves, can play in supporting improvement in teaching.

- **The extent to which state standards are able to serve effective teaching is partially dependent on the nature of the accountability system**. The specific accountability systems that get created are, indeed, powerful actors in the reform environment. In fact, teachers' experiences in this project suggest that accountability measures and the high stakes attached to them exert stronger pressure than standards themselves in influencing priorities in schools. Some accountability systems compel schools and districts to pay attention to the standards; others compel them to ignore standards.

- **State assessment systems can mask the progress students make toward writing standards**. In states where there is a writing assessment that reflects the standards, students have potential to demonstrate and make visible to the public their learning with respect to the standards. Teachers and schools can also adopt state performance criteria in designing local assessments, again to demonstrate student learning gains. In the absence of this kind of assessment, the progress that "sub-standard" students make remains invisible outside the classroom.

- **Standards do not help teachers achieve them.** State standards might inform a teacher's learning goals, but they do not help her know what to do in the classroom to help her students achieve them. Teaching well requires discipline knowledge that informs a high quality curriculum, a technical repertoire of practice (pedagogical approaches, specific lessons), the ability to diagnose and understand the root sources of each student's existing skills and knowledge, and knowledge of what motivates and enables each student to learn. It also includes the overall ability to link all these pieces of knowledge in such a way that instruction actually moves students in appropriate ways toward standards—and to do so within the built-in

constraints of school, including fixed (usually short) time periods, availability of appropriate materials, and so on.

The effectiveness of the FOS project

In addressing the guiding questions below, we take the above observations into account because they enable a clearer understanding of how formal state standards can make a positive contribution to teaching and learning. They also help us formulate a reasonable assessment of the value of—indeed, the need for—professional development opportunities such as NWP-FOS if standards are to fulfill their promise.

1. To what extent did the FOS Project offer participating teachers knowledge and skills they need to support student improvement in writing with respect to standards?

There is ample evidence that the FOS project provided teachers with opportunity to gain knowledge and skills that are critically important to their developing individual working standards and classroom practices that take public policy standards well into account, that reflect the standards guiding their profession, and that enable them to foster improvement in students' writing.

The project supported teachers in the following:

- becoming articulate about the working standards they adhere to every day in their classrooms, and being able and willing to question them and expand them
- understanding the contents of state standards documents
- internalizing state standards through reflection and professional dialogue
- critically comparing state standards with the standards of their professional community
- refining their expectations and goals for students in light of state standards
- inventing and testing new lessons that bridge the gap between state standards documents and students
- understanding more specifically the learning needs and potentials of their students
- becoming more analytic in assessing their students' existing skills and identifying the gains they make as developing writers
- understanding more deeply and realistically the outcomes of their own practices

All of these are necessary contributors to teachers' ability and capacity to support individual students—including those with the farthest distance to go—in making demonstrable progress toward attainment of state standards.

2. What are the key design features of the NWP-FOS professional development model that supported teacher learning?

The professional culture and guiding principles of the NWP made it ideally suited as a professional community within which teachers could constructively interact with state standards. The design of the FOS project, in particular, enabled teachers who worked in different contexts and who had different learning needs to link state standards in productive and meaningful ways to the realities of teaching and learning in their classrooms.

There is no single set of "answers" about how best to teach; teaching well involves informed problem-solving in context. What teachers need, then, is ongoing opportunity to become informed, to address specific problems in context, and to build practical wisdom through study of practice and its effects for students.

Perhaps the most important feature of the FOS project is that it embodied the principles and values about teachers and teacher learning that guide the NWP. Within this NWP framework, the FOS project included several specific design qualities that made it a productive learning experience for the wide range of participants:

- **Offering teachers relevant information and opportunities to engage with it critically and openly**

FOS teachers studied the state standards, they read and discussed policy papers about state standards and practice, and they read studies written by teacher researchers. It may seem overly obvious to point out that the FOS project gave teachers access to this basic information and professional resources—except that teachers typically have little access to such information and they seldom have opportunity to study and discuss it with professional peers. If teachers do encounter state standards at all in their schools or districts, the documents tend to be transmitted to teachers as policy directives within the mainstream governance system—from state, to district, to school. Thus from the participants' perspectives, FOS gave them a rare opportunity to discuss standards in a climate of professional sense-making, rather than one of compliance.

- **Balancing individual and collective work and learning**

In the FOS project, teachers who had different amounts of teaching skill and faced different challenges and opportunities in their schools and classrooms could identify foci for their work that were meaningful and productive for them as individuals. They did this, however, in the company of colleagues within a network that fosters critical reflection and embraces rigorous professional standards. The collective learning gave individuals access to the pool of professional wisdom and reminded them that they are linked to external expectations. Support for individual work enabled each teacher to

translate from generalized ideals to the specific actions that served their students. Individual work with group support enabled varying individuals to advance in their learning in a direction that worked for them, but within a framework of professional norms and expectations.

- **Grounding activity in rigorous analysis of teaching and student work**

Studying their teaching and their students' work compelled the participants to gain understanding of the bases of their instructional decisions and the real effects of their practice—that is, to observe the reciprocal relationships between what they taught and what students showed in their written work. Again, this in-depth study of teaching and learning stands in contrast to the typical experience teachers have in schools and districts (if they have any opportunity to encounter standards at all), which is to "align" course curriculum with state standards—and to stop the process there.

- **Supporting inquiry over time**

Designing teacher learning as inquiry assumed teachers could and must identify what they needed to learn in order to improve as teachers, and also invested teachers with the responsibility to pursue authentic insight and understanding. Sustaining the work for more than two years meant that the teachers worked through—rather than glossed over—the complex tasks of making standards real through practice and of revising individual standards in light of what they were observing in the standards and in their students' work.

- **Requiring teachers to compose in writing their inquiries into standards, technical matters of practice, and student learning.**

It would not be a Writing Project without teacher writing[25]. In FOS, the teachers wrote throughout the project—articulating their personal standards, documenting their teaching practice, analyzing student work. But as anyone who writes knows, writing is a mode and medium of thinking, of concept formation. It was the concerted last few weeks of putting their inquiries into writing that, finally, pushed the teachers farther toward public, explicit articulation how state standards, their own individual standards, the actions and decisions they make as teachers, and their attempts to understand their students and their progress as learners all relate to one another.

[25] The "Essentials of the Model" document describes the writing done in Summer Institutes. That writing focuses on both personal and professional topics and audiences, but it does not typically involve extended inquiry into practice. Some FOS participants who were veterans of teacher research groups had written about their research studies.

3. What function can a NWP-FOS professional development model serve in a standards-based reform effort?

Professional development opportunities that are built on the principles and practices reflected in the NWP-FOS project are a critical contributor to a state's investment in supporting improved teaching and learning with respect to high quality standards. Through this model of professional development, state standards become an active and influential component of teachers' everyday classroom standards.

Observations from the FOS project enable us to posit that there is a necessary and constructive role for state standards to play in the development of teachers' everyday working standards. What is that role? Authors of state standards might hope that theirs would become the single set of standards that teachers bring to their daily work. We believe this is an unrealistic notion. What is realistic is that state standards might become a strong influence among the several sources of teachers' standards—i.e., a strong leg in the three-legged stool.

A dynamic equilibrium among standards from different sources

The question of how strong the standards leg should be is an important one: Should standards be strongest and most robust influence, more influential than the standards developed from the practice of teaching and from the profession? We propose that a healthier ideal—and more achievable reality—is a *dynamic equilibrium* that is attained through continual interaction among standards derived from the three sources.

Observations of teachers in the FOS project students offer a rationale for this notion of equilibrium rather than an over-dependence on one source. What happens, for example, when a teacher's working standards are forged only from personal teaching experience? This can happen when teachers have limited access to professional and policy standards outside their school. And if the students have become labeled as chronically "low-performing"—and if this conception of students is reinforced by the school routines of tracking, remediation programs and the like—teachers' expectations about what their students "can" or "should" do can become limited.

Rigorous state standards can challenge such teachers to "stretch," as some FOS teachers put it—i.e., can challenge them to re-think their goals and change their practice. This is how teachers can bring their individual standards into greater equilibrium, weakening the leg that stands solely on personal practice and strengthening the leg that stands on public policy. Indeed, this hope—that teachers are willing to raise their expectations—has been an important impetus in standards-based reform. For while it is untrue that teachers are "standards-free," it may well be true that some teachers do not take public expectations well enough into account. In similar school contexts, we have seen that rigorous state standards can also give teachers with higher personal standards the

"courage of their convictions" so they can transcend the limiting norms and practices in their schools. In this case, state standards are bolstering and giving greater legitimacy to teachers' personal standards.

Alternatively, what if a teacher's individual working standards derive solely from state policy? If this teacher were to adhere *only* to state content standards as the guide for what to teach at a given grade level, she might be blind to her students' existing knowledge and skills and thus not be able to devise instruction that starts with the students and moves them toward standards that are unattainable at the moment. Further, adhering to state standards without into account those of the profession might cause a teacher to subvert basic tenets of the discipline. Standards honed from practice and informed by professional interaction can thus temper those policy-generated set standards that may have political currency but are of lower quality. In this way, again, there is continual interplay among standards of different sources, leading to a dynamic equilibrium where multiple sources of standards check and balance one another.

The role of professional development in helping teachers hold their individual working standards in dynamic equilibrium

Our assessment of the FOS model is that it enabled teachers to keep their individual working standards in a state of dynamic equilibrium because it served as a professional community that supported dialogue, reading, and writing about the multiple sources of standards—all *vis a vis* the live, continuous action and interaction of teaching and learning.

What is especially remarkable is that FOS functioned in this way for both new-career and late-career teachers, and for also for teachers who work in different state reform systems. Newer teachers, for example, brought quite undeveloped standards from personal experience and had less confidence in their individual working standards. They were more inclined than veterans to embrace state standards as a foundational guide and inspiration. This is indeed an ideal role for well-conceived state standards to play.

It was important that the new teachers interacted with the state standards within the NWP, a community of practice that is at the vanguard of professional standards. First, new teachers need help in building bridges from standards to practice. In FOS they got this help within a professional context that cultivates *both* high standards and good concrete practices. Second, given the potential for standards documents to exert a strong influence on new teachers, it is especially critical that the public policy standards themselves are well conceived. If these new teachers interact with state standards in a context that also bolsters their professional standards, then they can invite the state standards to influence them strongly, but not *too* strongly. In sum, the FOS project

created conditions where new-career teachers could build daily working standards that rest on three strong legs.

In contrast to new teachers, veterans brought personal standards made robust from years of practice and honed within the professional network of the NWP. For these teachers, new state policy documents entered the interaction as the weaker influence. However, because of the principles and design of the FOS project, these veterans did not marginalize or reject state standards. Rather, the veteran teachers—both skeptics and non-skeptics—engaged with state standards seriously by evaluating how their own standards and the state standards stood up to one another. This is an important point, given the tendency of veteran teachers—especially in stressed school environments—to shield themselves from policy influences. In this interplay, the teachers bolstered their individual working standards, sometimes by validating them and sometimes by changing them. They also bolstered their working standards by probing the connections between state standards, teaching, and learning in ways they had never done.

To the extent that state standards documents are of high quality, they have potential to serve as guide and inspiration to new teachers, and they can even become a foundational pillar of the individual working standards that new teachers develop over their careers. High quality state standards can also function to check and balance veteran teachers' more robust sets of personal and professional standards. It is the presence of supportive, rigorously intellectual professional community that helps the standards documents become real for teachers' practices in these ways—helping new teachers build bridges to practice, encouraging experienced teachers to take the standards seriously enough to really re-examine their practices, and preventing less well-conceived policy documents from having a stronger influence than they should.

The teachers' experiences in the FOS project show that standards have potential to contribute to improved teaching. This potential can be realized when teachers have access to professional development that enables them to build the multiple knowledges and skills that teaching entails. Thus we suggest that this kind of professional development model and opportunity is a necessary component of any reasonable state effort to support high standards and to support student improvement in writing.

EPILOGUE

This report was originally written for the two sponsors of the FOS project—the Stuart Foundation and the National Writing Project. In the Fall of 2002, we at Inverness Research Associates decided to post this report on our website, making it available to anyone. Before doing so, we invited the teachers whose work we illustrated to review the vignettes to verify their accuracy (and ensure confidentiality). We were struck by two themes in their feedback. First, thankfully, we heard that our brief summaries did, in fact, capture their work accurately. "You have done a masterful job of making sense of my project and of finding and conveying the essential points," said one. Another said, "I went through all 71 pages and found the write-up informative and well articulated."

Second, while these vignettes captured a moment in time, times had changed for some of the teachers. One person wrote this in an email about changing conditions at her school:

> Your report brought back many fond memories of being with the FOS folks, especially my [writing project site] colleagues, as well as the agony of the difficult teaching times. After reading the report and looking back over those years, I realize how fortunate I was to have had the support of so many people during the most troubling teaching time of my career. I am happy to report that we have had a change of administration, new active Writing Project colleagues on the staff, and a renewed attitude toward good writing instruction that makes me hopeful that some good is coming out of the Standards movement.

Another person said that the conversation at her school, which had only been about standardized test scores and not standards, has changed in the past two years: "It's different now—much more emphasis on standards."

One teacher emphasized changes in her own stance toward standards and teaching:

> The summary [in this report] is a good representation of the paper I turned in [at the end of the FOS project]. My most recent revision, though, has moved in a different direction...The revised paper looks at two students with very low SAT-9 scores whose writing portfolios show significant improvement in their writing. Although some schools would have relegated these students to remedial classes, I determined that I would give these students access to the grade-level curriculum other students had a support them as they worked to improve their reading and writing skills. The portfolios are evidence of the teaching I did and the progress of each student.

> I changed my focus because I realized that the conversation didn't need to be about should we have standards or not, or whose standards we should use. The conversation now is on how do we help students achieve grade-level standards if we give them a curriculum that is below grade-level? Phrased more positively, if we want out lowest students to achieve the standards for their grade level, they must have access to the curriculum and practices that allow them to achieve those standards.

These postscripts are a reminder of how important it is that teachers have *continual* opportunity for reflection on practice and professional dialogue both within and outside their schools.

APPENDIX A
SUMMARY OF PROJECT ACTIVITY AND TEACHER LEARNING

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOCUS →	WHAT TEACHERS LEARNED AND GAINED	→ IMPLICATIONS RELATED TO STUDENT LEARNING
COMPONENT 1 Critical reading and structured discussion of multiple standards documents currently in use. (3-day institute for all groups in summer 1998.)	Teachers became conversant in the format, language, and concepts of state standards documents Teachers became broadly knowledgeable about multiple standards documents. Teachers became more conscious of their individual standards by exploring the ways and extent to which they were and were not consistent with those of: -Their state standards -Other formal standards they consider themselves accountable to -One another's standards, as members of the NWP -The daily working standards of their school colleagues	The participants' students are "present" in teachers' references to individual students and specific characteristics of their students. Some wonder—how can I help my ELL or other struggling students?
COMPONENT 2 Participants identified an important standard, began exploring it in classroom practice (1998-99 year. Monthly 3-hour meetings of local site groups; individual teacher work between meetings.)	Some teachers used state standards to identify "gaps" in their curriculum, and began enhancing their practice by developing new lessons. Teachers gained practical classroom teaching ideas from one another . Some teachers focused on individual students who were farthest below state standards, asking how their approaches might aim students toward the selected standard. Most participants found they lacked sufficient skill and experience to analyze individual students' written work critically and use that analysis to make teaching decisions.	Students gained access to new or enhanced lessons that teachers were developing Some students gained additional personal attention from the teacher (especially low-performing students)

SUMMARY OF PROJECT ACTIVITY AND TEACHER LEARNING, cont.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOCUS →	WHAT TEACHERS LEARNED AND GAINED	→ IMPLICATIONS RELATED TO STUDENT LEARNING
COMPONENT 3 Teachers were taught to analyze and learn from student writing through the technique of writing "digs." (All-site 3-day institute summer 1999)	Teachers learned a structured technique for examining student work, both to: - assess progress toward a state standard - decide what next teaching "move" to make Teachers gained deeper insight into their own and their peers' individual working standards and practical knowledge of teaching and learning. Teachers began to become more articulate (less intuitive and tacit) in explaining teaching problems and decisions, as well as student progress.	Some teachers began documenting student progress toward state standards, as well as gathering evidence that student writing development is intertwined with other factors.
COMPONENT 4 Participants carried out intensive individual inquiries into teaching, learning, and state standards. (1999-2000 year: Monthly 3-hour meetings of local groups, with individual work between meetings.)	Teachers gained larger repertoires of practice by creating and testing out new units and lessons. Some teachers expanded their curricula to address multiple state standards Those teachers who were focusing on "low-performing" students gained insight into ways to diagnose their skills and to document their incremental progress toward state standards. For some teachers, this included gaining new understanding of the benefit of making progress visible to students and their parents. All developed more skills as reflective teachers.	Students experienced new instructional strategies and more individualized attention. Some students gained more explicit information about the standards and assessment criteria. Some gained more explicit knowledge of their own progress.

SUMMARY OF PROJECT ACTIVITY AND TEACHER LEARNING, cont.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOCUS →	WHAT TEACHERS LEARNED AND GAINED	→ IMPLICATIONS RELATED TO STUDENT LEARNING
COMPONENT 5 Participants analyzed evidence they had collected about teaching and learning and wrote their studies--making meaning from their inquiries (Summer 2000. Participants examined the implications of their research through writing. They also made their conclusions public and explicit by sharing them with the larger group.)	Teachers gained skill in analyzing and documenting evidence of student development. Teachers gained new insight into the details of their students' writing development. Teachers gained greater insight into the effectiveness or shortcoming of specific lessons and practices in fostering writing development by experimenting with lessons and applying writing assessment criteria to them. Those who focused on "low-performing" students gained greater insight into the challenges of diagnosing their skills, designing instruction that meets the students where they are, and helps them make progress toward state standards.	Low-performing students can make observable progress toward writing standards. That progress is often not visible on standardized or other large-scale assessments. Lessons that teachers invent can help students themselves understand the standards. Effective writing instruction can help students improve performance on writing assessments.