

NWP VOICES

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Leaders from two different National Writing Project sites created a regional network to support their work on a local level.

The Need for Regional Networks

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Teachers need networks. They need to find like-minded colleagues to grow professionally. We all need thinking partners with whom to share ideas, develop teaching strategies, and find new resources. Teachers in larger schools may find colleagues in their own spaces, yet many teachers must reach beyond their own schools and districts to find networks. This is especially true in rural areas, where a teacher might be the only teacher in a grade level or even a specific discipline (Brenner et al.). The *Why*

Rural Matters report revealed that one in six students nationally attends rural schools and that “the national median enrollment for rural districts [is] just 484.5 students” (Showalter 1).

The NCTE network supports 25,000 members with an unlimited number of entrance points. While every teacher can find a community within NCTE, the vast network can be overwhelming. My first NCTE Annual Convention was both wonderful and lonely. The sessions were generative, but the conference was so large that opportunities for engaging in conversations ended up being limited. A state or regional network can shift focus more easily to address local needs or interests, allowing members to share and gather information (Lieberman 226).

Regional networks allow us an entrance into a broader discussion outside of our state boundaries while remaining intimate enough to establish relationships across sites and states. Such networks not only allow educators access to resources they may not have in their local contexts, but they also support educators in viewing

themselves beyond the singular classroom, helping to find growth in leadership or research areas (Niesz 610; Schiff et al.).

THE STORY OF A REGIONAL NETWORK

When we, Rebecca and Ellen, began a series of conversations that connected the National Writing Project sites in the South, we wanted to create a space for local programs to come together to talk, develop strategies, and form new connections in support of teachers across our region. The work began, as many good things do, with two leaders finding commonalities and shared goals. We both work to support rural teachers who face challenges such as systemic under-resourcing and higher rates of teacher turnover. We also knew we were smarter together and that we could help each other be more responsive to the teachers in our areas.

As longtime site directors in the National Writing Project, we knew the value of a network, especially one grounded in the core philosophy of “teachers teaching teachers,” a model in which K–16 educators work together to

advance the teaching of writing. We decided the easiest way to start the network was to begin with a small conference, and we were fortunate to have a model for creating a local network through a regional conference: the National Writing Project Midwest Conference.

Our first NWP in the South Conference was held over a two-day period in March 2019 in Greenville, South Carolina, and was paired with the Upstate Writing Project Spring Conference. The format for our first day provided time and space for this diverse group of National Writing Project directors, teachers, and principals to meet and share their site and classroom challenges and successes. We shared our writing, participated in stimulating discussions, and developed plans to strengthen our individual sites and our network.

After the March 2020 conference was cancelled due to the outbreak of COVID-19, the 2021 virtual conference lit a spark for teachers to return to classrooms with a renewed sense of purpose during a pandemic, and the second virtual conference in spring 2022 reaffirmed how important relationships are as we all focus on our classrooms. As we planned each conference, we intentionally created spaces for teachers to share practices, for site leaders to share programs, and for everyone to engage in deep conversations.

Along with this work, the regional network created an avenue for us to provide connections through professional development

opportunities. Some educators participated in cross-state virtual book studies, while others participated in conference calls during the first year of the pandemic. Those calls provided avenues for site leaders working to support teachers in their classrooms as everyone was trying to determine how best to move forward. Having a community built on shared values gave all of us new ideas.

A NEW SITE DIRECTOR'S STORY

Smaller networks are invaluable for new site directors as they think about the best ways to support teachers in their areas. When we began NWP in the South, Michelle—new to her role as co-director of the National Writing Project of Acadiana—found that networking events provided a time and place for site leaders from the same region to share what they found to be effective and sustainable for their site. Michelle explains, “For our site, NWP in the South offered me, a new co-director, a space to forge connections with other site leaders during a time in which in-person events were not taking place. Through virtual conferences, we shared the work happening at our site, and these gatherings provided a sounding board for ideas we had moving forward. During a time of so much change and uncertainty in education, it could be easy to become discouraged or feel overwhelmed. However, being able to connect with nearby NWP site leaders has been invigorating

and has helped our site to support teachers as writers and instructors of writing.”

Teachers more than ever need opportunities for networking outside of their own institutions to seek new ideas and strengthen collective teacher voices.

LAST THOUGHTS


Opportunities for networking are vital to the profession. As professional development in many states shifts toward in-house models, teachers more than ever need opportunities for networking outside of their own institutions to seek new ideas and strengthen collective teacher voices. We can choose to remain in our individual classrooms, but to grow as educators, we have to leave that space and cross into another, whether by reading a book or having a conversation or finding a local Writing Project site or a national network like NCTE. There are some practical steps that sites or NWP teachers can use to create their own networks:

1. Visit the NWP website and identify other active sites in your region.
2. Reach out to directors of those sites to see who might be interested in collaborating in the development of a regional network.
3. Connect with site directors who are already taking up

this work to discuss successful strategies and potential obstacles.

4. Begin making contacts within the extended network you have identified for your site and developing a collective plan.

Local Writing Project sites and NCTE state affiliates can be the perfect place to begin, and we encourage all educators to find a

professional network in their local area by visiting www.nwp.org or ncte.org/groups/affiliates/. 

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The David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English recognizes published research in language, literature, rhetoric, teaching procedures, or cognitive processes that may sharpen the teaching or the content of English courses at any level. Any work of scholarship or research in language, literature, rhetoric, or pedagogy and learning published during the past five years (between January 2017 and December 2022) is eligible. Works nominated should be exemplary instances of the genre, address broad research questions, contain material that is accessibly reported, and reflect a project that stands the test of time.

Nomination information can be found on the NCTE website at <http://www.ncte.org/awards/david-h-russell-research-award/>. Nominations must be submitted by **March 1, 2023**. The award will be presented at the NCTE Awards Ceremony associated with the Annual Convention.