National Evaluation of Writing Project School Partnerships

Final Report – Executive Summary

September 2012

Research conducted by SRI International

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Executive Summary

Although communication is central to any list of essential "21st-century skills," writing instruction has been deemphasized in American classrooms. As Applebee and Langer (2011) describe it, "[T]he actual writing that goes on in typical classrooms across the United States remains dominated by tasks in which the teacher does all the composing, and students are left only to fill in missing information, whether copying directly from a teacher's presentation, completing worksheets and chapter summaries, replicating highly formulaic essay structures keyed to the high-stakes tests they will be taking, or writing the particular information the teacher is seeking." The results are not surprising. According to National Assessment of Educational Progress data (Salahu-Din, Persky & Miller, 2008), just one-third (33%) of U.S. eighth graders write proficiently. There is some evidence that state and federal school accountability policies that have focused educators' attention on student achievement in reading and mathematics have exacerbated the problem. Most specifically, by calling for accountability systems based on annual testing in English language arts and mathematics, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)—and the states' responses to it—appears to have contributed to a narrowing of the curriculum (Center on Education Policy, 2005).

Concerns about the quality of students' writing are not new, however. The National Writing Project traces its history back to 1974, when the University of California, Berkeley, sponsored a small team of faculty and K–12 educators to provide professional development for teachers with the goal of improving the writing skills of incoming freshmen. It has since grown into a national network composed of nearly 200 university-based Local Writing Project sites. These sites work to build local teacher leadership capacity through Invitational Summer Institutes and continuity programs for the teacher leaders who participate in these institutes. Local Writing Project sites also offer inservice programs and

a range of youth, family, and community programs led by the teacher leaders who have participated in Invitational Summer Institutes. Through their inservice programs, Local Writing Project sites seek to improve writing instruction by providing locally customized professional development to teachers in local schools and districts.

Partnerships are an emerging area of work in the portfolios of many Local Writing Project sites. Partnerships are defined in the National Writing Project network as a relationship of more than 1 year wherein a Local Writing Project site and its partner (typically a school or district) share responsibility for setting goals, planning work, and supporting the partnership activities. Partnership work with middle-grades schools makes up a small proportion of the overall National Writing Project portfolio, comprising 3% to 4% of the work. To learn more about this emerging area of its work, the National Writing Project contracted with SRI International to conduct a study of Local Writing Project site partnership work with schools serving middle grades.

Research Design

The study design included a cluster randomized controlled trial (RCT) to estimate the effects of partnerships on teacher practices and student writing, combined with a multimethod study to document how partnerships were developed and implemented in participating schools and sites. The study began with a baseline year (2007–08) during which partnership schools could plan the work with their Local Writing Project sites but could not commence professional development. From 2008–09 through 2010–11, the Local Writing Project sites and partner schools could implement their partnerships. The emphasis on describing implementation in this study is critical because planful variation is core to the National Writing Project model of co-designed partnerships. RCTs, which provide an unbiased estimate of the average impact of a specified treatment, assume that uniform implementation of the intervention is desired. We knew that would not be the case (because it was not a goal of the intervention). As a result, the implementation data provide a critical lens for documenting the variation and explaining findings from outcome analyses.

To establish criteria for assessing partnership implementation, SRI conducted a focus group with site directors identified by the National Writing Project as experienced with partnership work. The following four criteria emerged from the focus group as defining the minimum characteristics of a partnership *for the purpose of the study*:

1. A partnership is co-designed. Both the Local Writing Project site and the school must share an understanding of the goals and strategies of the partnership.

2. A partnership is co-resourced. There must be evidence, over multiple years, of district and/or school leaders' commitment of resources to the partnership.

3. A critical mass of teachers (35% to 100%) must participate in the professional development, regardless of how teachers are selected into a partnership. The strategies for recruiting teachers to participate in Local Writing Project site programming may include (but are not limited to) recruiting volunteers or targeting specific groups of teachers (e.g., grade level or department).

4. Participating teachers must receive sufficient professional development. As a rule of thumb, the critical mass of participating teachers (defined above) should receive at least 30 contact hours of professional development (delivered by Local Writing Project staff and/or local teacher-consultants) each year.

The study sample included 14 Local Writing Project sites and 39 schools. We refer to the 20 schools in the treatment group as "partnership" schools because they were randomly assigned to form partnerships with their Local Writing Project sites. We refer to the 19 schools in the control group as "delayed partnership" schools because they were eligible to form partnerships with their Local Writing Project sites after the study concluded.

We used multiple data collection strategies to gather comparable data from the partnership and delayed partnership schools, including teacher surveys, teacher logs, teacher assignments, student work, on-demand writing prompts, and interviews. These instruments included measures of school context, teacher professional community, teacher professional practices, instructional practices, student opportunities to learn writing, student outcomes, and professional development. We collected additional information from the Local Writing Project sites on partnership planning and implementation. The full report explains each instrument in greater detail. We turn now to our key findings.

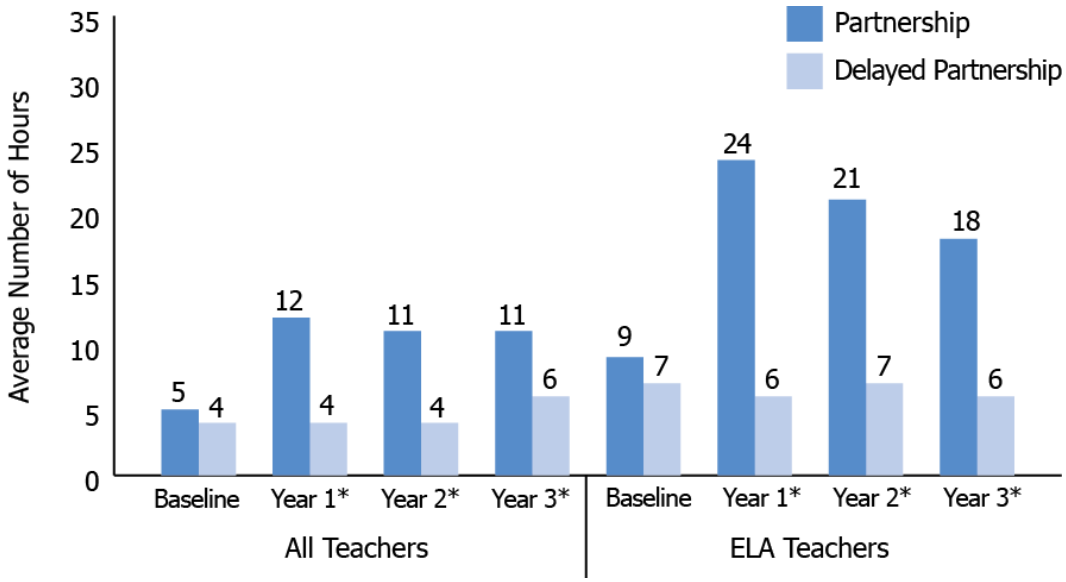
Implementation

In short, we learned that implementing partnerships between Local Writing Project sites and middle schools is extremely difficult. Schools typically did not place a top priority on writing instruction, reflecting prevailing policy trends (i.e., increasing focus on reading and math under NCLB) and results of studies on the place of writing in the curriculum of American secondary schools (e.g., limited instructional time devoted to writing; see Applebee and Langer, 2011). As a result, even when Local Writing Project sites met schools at the level of their stated needs and interests, the duration of professional development provided did not meet the study's definition of a partnership. As a result, no schools and Local Writing Project sites attained the level of partnership professional development anticipated in the study design. Partnership schools did, however, receive a greater amount of writing professional development than did delayed partnership schools. We next review these main implementation findings.

Schools assigned to form partnerships increased the amount of writing professional development that teachers received, compared with schools assigned to delay partnership formation.

The amount of writing professional development that partnership and delayed partnership teachers reported receiving was equivalent at baseline (Exhibit ES-1). In contrast, during each of the 3 years of partnership implementation, teachers in partnership schools participated in an average of 5 to 8 more hours of writing professional development than their counterparts in delayed partnership schools; English language arts (ELA) teachers participated in an average of 12 to 18 more hours per year of writing professional development than their counterparts in delayed partnership schools.

Exhibit ES-1
Average Duration of Writing Professional Development for Teachers



Source: Teacher surveys, 2007–08 through 2010–11.
** p < 0.05.*

By the conclusion of the study, the depth and breadth of teacher participation in partnership professional development varied considerably, both across and within those schools that were assigned to form partnerships.

Looking school by school, average cumulative hours (over 3 years) of partnership professional development for the entire faculty ranged from 4 hours per teacher at one school to 53 hours per teacher at another. The range was greater when examining average cumulative hours for seventh- and eighth-grade ELA teachers across the schools—partnership professional development for these teachers averaged from as few as 7 cumulative hours at one school to as many as 194 cumulative hours at another.

The proportion of teachers who participated in 30 or more hours of partnership professional development in a given year varied across and within partnership schools. Exhibit ES-2 shows the distribution of the percentage of teachers participating in 30 or more hours of partnership professional development in each year of the study.

- Each dot represents a school and shows the percentage of teachers (all teachers or seventh- and eighth-grade ELA teachers, depending on the section of the graph) participating in 30 or more hours of partnership professional development in a

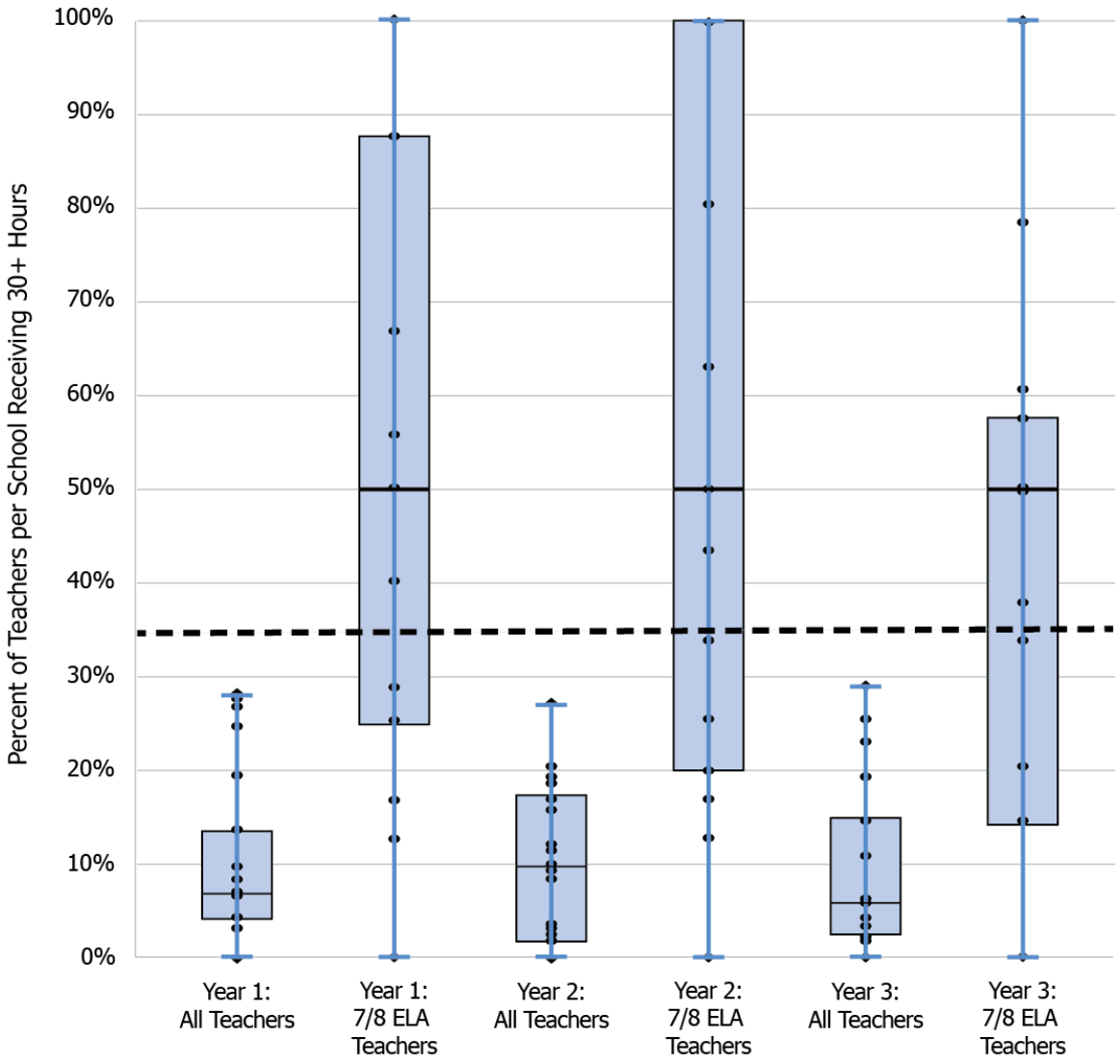
given year of the study. (Note that when more than one school has the same value, only one dot is visible.)

- Each vertical line spans the entire range of average schoolwide participation rates, from the school with the lowest participation rate to the school with the highest participation rate for that category (all teachers or seventh- and eighth-grade ELA teachers, depending on the section of the graph).
- Each shaded box represents the middle 50% of schools in terms of participation rates: the solid line at the bottom of the box shows the 25th percentile, the solid line inside the box shows the median, and the solid line at the top of the box shows the 75th percentile.
- The dashed line across the entire graph indicates the implementation criterion of 35% of teachers receiving 30 or more hours of partnership professional development.

For all faculty, the proportion participating in 30 or more hours per year ranged from 0% to 29% of teachers. Restricting the analysis to seventh- and eighth-grade ELA teachers only, the proportion of teachers participating in 30 or more hours of partnership professional development in a given year ranged from 0% to 100%.

Exhibit ES-2

Distribution of Partnership Schools by Percentage of Teachers Participating in 30 or More Hours of Partnership Professional Development in Each of 3 Years



Source: Partnership-monitoring reports, 2008–09 through 2010–11.

Exhibit reads: In Year 1, the proportion of all teachers per partnership school who participated in 30 or more hours of partnership professional development ranged from 0% to 28%. The school in the 25th percentile had 4% of teachers participate in 30 or more hours, the school in the 50th percentile (indicated by a horizontal median line) had 7% of teachers participate in 30 or more hours, and the school in the 75th percentile had 13% of teachers participate in 30 or more hours.

Note: The median line for ELA teachers is in fact at 50% each year. Given that many schools have a small (and even) number of 7th/8th-grade ELA faculty (e.g., two or four 7th/8th ELA teachers), several schools are at 50% participation rate each year.

Partnership professional development covered a wide variety of topics both across and within schools.

Partnership professional development included many topics. Across the schools, writing to learn (i.e., using writing for the purpose of learning other content) was the most frequently covered topic. Given the variation in content, the extent to which the professional development content was aligned with the specific teacher and student outcome measures used in the study varied as well.

Across the partnership schools, the format of the professional development often involved engaging teachers in writing themselves and experiencing specific instructional strategies and activities before implementing them in their classrooms.

High-quality professional development provides teachers an opportunity to deepen their content knowledge and see how to apply what they are learning to their instruction (Desimone, 2009). One way partnership professional development provided teachers the opportunity to learn about both content and pedagogy was by engaging them in writing themselves. The two main goals of engaging teachers in writing were to help them better understand what writing is like for their students and to develop their own skills as writers. Similarly, teachers often participated in writing activities that they could then engage in with their students.

Variation in participation and content appears to result from a combination of the national policy context, schools' baseline practices, Local Writing Projects' experience and expertise, and efforts to adapt professional development to school contexts and teacher needs.

More specifically:

- The broader accountability and policy context—particularly whether and how states assess student writing in the middle grades—influenced the priority some schools placed on participation in partnership professional development.
- Variation in the content covered in partnership professional development stems from the specific nature of site expertise, and from efforts to engage a broad group of teachers, offer experiences that deepen over time, and respond to different school contexts.

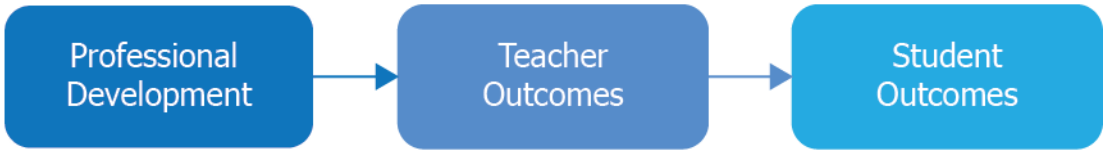
- At baseline, the frequency of writing instruction was limited and practices varied greatly, contributing to the nature and variety of content covered in partnership professional development.
- Partnership formation requires substantial expertise, and many Local Writing Project sites participating in the study had limited prior experience with school partnerships.

These factors all contributed to the variation in partnership professional development described previously.

Outcomes

The ultimate goal of partnership professional development is to improve student writing ability. Presumably, teacher professional development cannot by itself alter student writing outcomes; professional development can influence teacher outcomes (specifically, teacher knowledge and instructional practices), which in turn can influence student outcomes (in this case, student writing). Therefore, the outcome analyses focus on the causal theory that is core to the conceptual framework, namely, the idea that professional development (the intervention) could lead to changes in teacher outcomes (the proximal outcome), which could lead to improved student learning (the ultimate outcome) (Exhibit ES-3).

Exhibit ES-3
The Basic Causal Theory



Taking advantage of the experimental design, we first conducted an intent-to-treat analysis of the impact of the intervention (as implemented by schools that were assigned to form partnerships) on teacher and student outcomes. However, given that the intervention was not implemented at a level that met the study's definition of a partnership, we explored the

question of whether partnerships might show promise for affecting teacher and student outcomes by conducting exploratory analyses examining the causal theory of how partnership professional development could affect student outcomes.

Key findings from the experimental analysis: The impact of being randomly assigned to form partnerships

Through an intent-to-treat (i.e., experimental) analysis, an RCT provides an unbiased estimate of the impact of being randomly assigned to a treatment versus control (or other experimental) group. The intent-to-treat analysis does not take into consideration that schools assigned to the intervention may not fully implement it. In the case where participants experience with high fidelity the conditions to which they were assigned, an RCT also provides an unbiased estimate of the effectiveness of the intervention. However, in the current study, the intervention was not implemented at a level that met the study's definition of a school partnership, so the RCT cannot estimate the effectiveness of partnerships. This analysis instead addresses the question: "What is the impact of being randomly assigned to form a partnership on teacher practices and student outcomes?"

Assignment of schools to form partnerships had an impact on teachers' perceptions of the influence of professional development on their writing instruction.[1]

An annual teacher survey asked teachers who provided writing instruction to indicate the extent to which professional development activities during the current year influenced the writing instruction they provided to their students. All teachers in the second and third years of implementation and ELA teachers across all 3 years of implementation in partnership schools were more likely than their counterparts in delayed partnership schools to report that professional development influenced their writing instruction.

Assignment of schools to form partnerships had a positive impact on the frequency and length of student writing.

The teacher log asked seventh- and eighth-grade ELA teachers whether a target student was engaged in a writing-related activity and the length of the writing assignment that the

[1] Unless otherwise noted, all impacts, correlations, and differences presented in the text are statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

student planned, composed, edited, or revised. In the first and third years of the intervention, seventh- and eighth-grade ELA teachers in partnership schools were more likely than their counterparts in delayed partnership schools to report that students were engaged in a writing-related activity.

In the third year of the partnership implementation, the survey asked teachers to describe how many times per week students typically wrote text that was one paragraph or longer. Compared with teachers in delayed partnership schools, partnership school teachers in general were more likely to report that students wrote at least one or two one-paragraph responses/compositions rather than less extended writing in a typical week. However, no statistically significant differences were found when ELA teachers in partnership schools were compared with ELA teachers in delayed partnership schools.

The analysis yielded no significant difference between schools assigned to form partnerships and schools assigned to delay partnership formation in the extent to which teachers reported that students engaged in writing-to-learn activities.

Because it was a frequent focus of partnership professional development, the third-year teacher survey asked teachers how frequently students engaged in writing-to-learn activities. The results did not identify statistically significant differences between partnership and delayed partnership teachers in reporting student engagement in writing-to-learn activities.

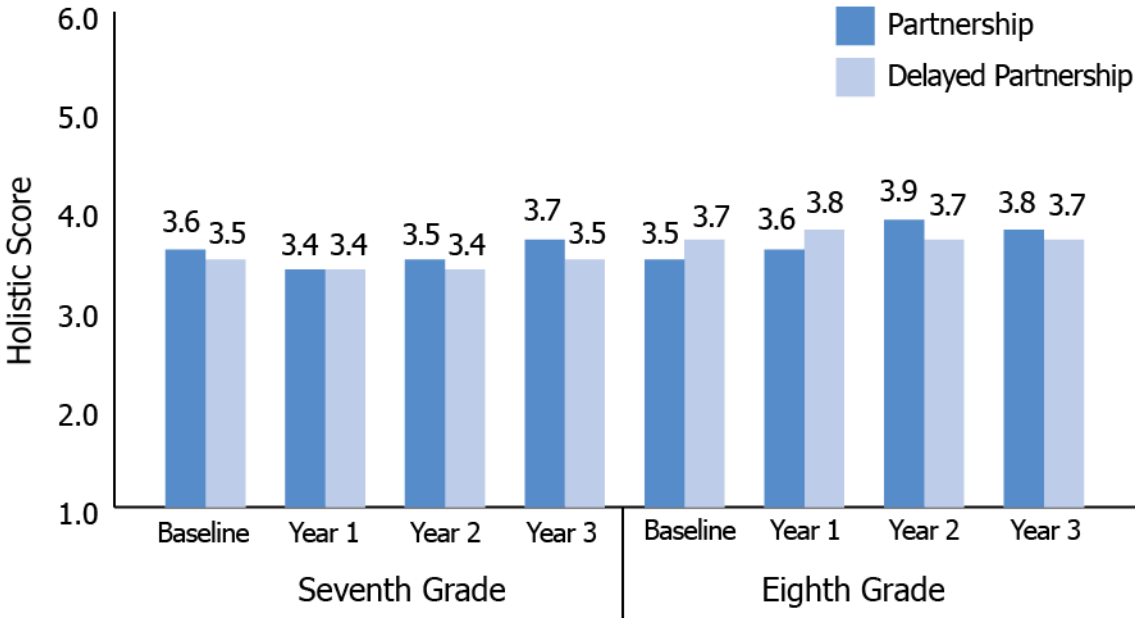
Random assignment to form a partnership had an impact on collaborative writing in seventh- and eighth-grade ELA classes. However, the analysis yielded no significant differences between schools assigned to form partnerships and schools assigned to delay partnership formation on other writing process measures.

The teacher log and the teacher survey included measures that we analyzed both individually and as part of scales representing the frequency of four key writing processes and student engagement in writing processes. Log results reflecting individual components of the writing process showed that seventh- and eighth-grade ELA teachers in the third year of implementation in partnership schools were more likely than their counterparts in delayed partnership schools to report that students worked collaboratively on a writing assignment, either helping produce a group writing product or giving or receiving help or feedback on individual writing tasks. The other analyses of teacher log and survey items and scales about writing processes found no statistically significant differences for all teachers or for ELA teachers between partnership and delayed partnership schools.

Results show that there were no statistically significant differences in student outcomes between schools assigned to form partnerships and schools assigned to delay partnership formation.

Across the entire sample and across the 3 years of partnership implementation, the analysis of student writing prompt data found no significant impact of being assigned to form a partnership on a holistic measure of writing quality (Exhibit ES-4) and no impacts on any of six individual measures of writing attributes. The analysis of the impacts on student writing in response to naturally occurring writing assigned within ELA classrooms found no significant impact of assignment to form a partnership on the holistic measure of writing quality or on two additional measures of writing attributes (construction of knowledge and development of expository writing).

Exhibit ES-4
Holistic Scores on Student Writing in Response to On-Demand Writing Prompts (Model-Adjusted Means)



Source: 2007–08, 2008–09, 2009–10, and 2010–11 student on-demand writing prompts.

There are several plausible explanations for not finding an impact of partnership assignment on student writing. A lack of impact could well be caused by the low levels of partnership implementation described previously; it could be that the teacher practices supported by professional development were not positively associated with student outcomes; it could be that the focus of partnership professional development did not align with the student outcomes that were measured in this study; or the answer could involve a combination of these and other plausible explanations.

To better understand the effect of partnership professional development on teacher and student outcomes, we conducted analyses to explore the causal theory of change by first looking at the relationship between partnership professional development and teacher instructional practices, and then examining the relationship between teacher instructional practices and student outcomes.

Key findings from the correlational analyses: The relationship between participation in partnership professional development and changes in teacher practices

The hypothesis that professional development will affect teacher and student outcomes is based on the premise that teachers participate in a sufficient amount of partnership professional development (in this case, 30 hours per year). The most plausible explanation for not finding a positive impact on student outcomes in the intent-to-treat analyses is that most teachers simply did not receive a level of professional development that met the study's criteria for partnership implementation. It is therefore essential to explore whether teachers who did take part in a sufficient amount of professional development benefited from it—the first step in the causal theory. To do this, we conducted regression analyses using covariates and propensity score matching as two statistical strategies for creating a comparative reference for teachers in partnership schools who received a sufficient level of professional development to test the hypothesis about the impact of partnership professional development (as opposed to the impact of school assignment to partnership). The strength of these analyses is that teachers in the treatment group received a sufficient level of the intervention. On the other hand, research has shown that statistical adjustments do not typically mirror the results of experiments, which by definition are unbiased (Glazerman, Levy, & Myers, 2003; Cook, Shadish, & Wong, 2008).

Compared with all teachers in delayed partnership schools, teachers with 90 or more hours of partnership professional development reported an increased frequency on instructional practices measured.

We compared teacher outcomes for teachers who participated in 90 or more hours of partnership professional development during 3 years of partnership implementation with those for all teachers in the comparison group, adjusting for ELA teacher status and school-level baseline teacher practices. Because teachers who voluntarily took part in more hours of partnership professional development may differ from the general teachers in the delayed partnership schools on unmeasured characteristics, the results from the analysis should not be considered to indicate causal relationships.

Compared with all teachers in delayed partnership schools, teachers with 90 or more hours of partnership professional development had increases on all instructional practice measures that we investigated (length of student writing, writing to learn, class time devoted to four key writing processes, and student engagement in writing processes). Adjusting for ELA teacher status and school-level baseline practice, teachers with 90 or more hours of partnership professional development were 15.8 times as likely as all teachers in delayed partnership schools to report that students wrote at least one or two one-paragraph responses/compositions in a typical week. Using the same adjustments, teachers with 90 or more hours of partnership professional development also reported a higher frequency of engaging students in writing to learn and the writing processes that made up our survey scales than all teachers in delayed partnership schools (Exhibit ES-5).

Exhibit ES-5
Differences between Teachers with 90 or More Hours of Partnership Professional Development and All Delayed Partnership Teachers for Teacher Practice Scales, Ranging from 0 ("Never") to 5 ("Daily") (Coefficients and Standard Errors from HLM Models)

Outcome	Coefficient	Standard Error
Writing to learn	0.43*	0.20
Class time on four key writing processes	0.40*	0.20
Student engagement in writing processes	0.58**	0.20

Source: 2007–08 and 2010–11 teacher survey; partnership-monitoring reports, 2008–09 through 2010–11.

** p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01*

Exhibit reads: Adjusting for ELA teacher status and school-level baseline practices, the average teacher with 90 or more hours of partnership professional development had a score that was 0.43 point higher—on a scale from 0 ("Never") to 5 ("Daily")—in response to a question about the frequency with which students engaged in writing-to-learn activities, compared with all teachers in delayed partnership schools.

Among teachers in partnership schools, duration of professional development was positively related to almost all teacher practices investigated on the survey.

Because our data show that participation varied across and within partnership schools, we conducted correlational analyses of the relationship between the duration of partnership professional development and teacher practices in the third year of partnership implementation, while adjusting for ELA teacher status and baseline teacher practices. These correlational analyses examine the relationship solely within the treatment group and thus do not address the impact of partnerships; rather, they explore the variation in outcomes within partnership schools. The analyses investigate the question: "What is the relationship between receiving a longer duration of partnership professional development (compared with a shorter duration of partnership professional development) and changes in teacher practice?" Results from these analyses by no means indicate causal relationships, because unobserved factors, such as motivation to improve, may contribute to both the outcomes and the duration of professional development in which teachers participated.

Duration was indicated by cumulative hours of partnership professional development for individual teachers, as well as by a dichotomous variable indicating whether a teacher participated in 90 or more hours of partnership professional development. Both analyses found that a longer duration of partnership professional development was associated with students' engaging in writing at least one or two one-paragraph responses/compositions in a typical week and with increases on both writing process scales (i.e., class time on four key

writing processes and student engagement in writing processes as measured on the teacher survey). Writing to learn was the only teacher practice measure that was unrelated to the duration of professional development.

These methods of comparing teachers between partnership and delayed partnership schools and within partnership schools found positive relationships between partnership professional development and teacher practices. None of them support causal inferences that speak directly to the original question, namely, the impact of partnerships on teacher practices. Combined, however, they suggest that partnership professional development, when of sufficient duration, is promising for positively affecting teacher practices.

Key findings from the correlational analyses: The relationship between teacher instructional practices and student writing performance

As suggested in the basic causal theory, we consider the instructional practices used by participating teachers to be the mediating factor between writing professional development and student writing outcomes. Therefore, it is worth exploring the relationships between specific teacher practices and student writing—the last step in the causal theory. We took teacher practice indicators among seventh- and eighth-grade ELA teachers in partnership and delayed partnership schools in the baseline and final years of implementation and correlated each of them with changes in student writing (as measured by holistic scores of fall and spring on-demand writing prompts) during these two years.[2] Note that these analyses do not attempt to model the effects of professional development in any way.

More frequent student engagement in writing at least one or two one-paragraph responses/compositions and more frequent student engagement in composing text were associated with improved performance on writing in response to prompts.

Across partnership and delayed partnership schools, teacher reports that students wrote at least one or two one-paragraph responses/compositions in a typical week and the number of days teachers reported that students composed text were positively associated with

[2] Because of the lack of a pretest measure, we cannot associate teacher practices with student performance on writing prompts during the first and second years of implementation

holistic scores on on-demand prompts for students in seventh- and eighth-grade ELA classes (Exhibit ES-6). Other teacher practices were not found to be associated with student writing performance.

Exhibit ES-6
Relationship between Seventh- and Eighth-Grade ELA Teachers' Practices and Holistic Scores on Student Response to Writing Prompt (Coefficients and Standard Errors from HLM Models)

Teacher practice	Coefficient	Standard Error
Survey Measures		
Length - at least 1 or 2 one-paragraph responses/compositions	0.27*	0.12
Writing to learn	0.02	0.05
Class time on four key writing processes	0.05	0.03
Student engagement in writing processes	0.06	0.04
Log Measures		
Major goal - improving skills in writing processes	-0.06	0.10
Length - at least 1 or 2 one-paragraph responses/compositions	0.13	0.12
Collaborative writing activities	0.20	0.13
Brainstorming or organizing ideas	0.12	0.12
Composing text	0.23*	0.12
Revising text	0.09	0.11
Editing Text	0.05	0.10

Source: 2007–08 and 2010–11 on-demand writing prompts; 2007–08 and 2010–11 teacher survey; 2007–08 and 2010–11 teacher log.
** p < 0.05*

Conclusions

Writing is critical to success in college and careers. The performance of U.S. students suggests that schools and teachers will need ongoing support to increase the proportion of students who develop strong writing skills. The Common Core State Standards bring a new focus to writing, but standards alone will not improve student learning (Loveless, 2012). A concurrent focus on developing the knowledge and skills of educators to improve the quality of instruction students receive is likely to be needed. Professional development is a key strategy for improving instruction. One of the main findings of the current study, however, is that merely offering an external partner with expertise in writing instruction and teacher professional development is insufficient for increasing the priority schools

place on writing instruction and for promoting sufficient participation in professional development.

Given professional development duration that was below levels desired for an RCT, this study offers exploratory findings to address the question of whether partnerships could potentially have positive effects on teacher practices and student outcomes. The results suggest that the theory holds some promise if teachers receive sufficient professional development, and if the professional development targets instructional practices that measurably affect student writing.