

March 9, 2023

Dear Chairman and Committee Members:

I'm urging you to restore funding to the *Northern Plains Writing Project (NPWP)* and the *Red River Valley Project (RRVWP)* through the Department of Public Instruction grant monies. I am a high school English teacher from Mandan, ND, and I can attest to the positive impact these writing projects make on teachers and students in our state.

How can we recruit, retain, and support teachers in our state?

I'm worried about retaining, supporting, and recruiting good teachers for our schools. According to a recent poll of educators in North Dakota, teachers are burning out at record rates (ndunited.org). The high burnout rate of teachers, along with the low number of people entering the teaching profession is a concern we should all share. The teacher shortage crisis in North Dakota is noticeable in the English classrooms where class sizes are burgeoning, and English teachers are hard to find. This year at Mandan High School, four English teachers have resigned— which is nearly half of our department, and several more English teachers will retire within the next couple of years. There were only six applicants for the positions, and we hired four of them, nearly-on-the-spot. There are currently 17 more English teaching positions open across the state. Couple the exodus from teaching with few people entering the profession, and you can see the problem. According to the North Dakota University System, there were only 20 students who graduated with English teaching degrees in our state last year (ndus.edu). While the answer to recruiting and retaining teachers is a complex, multi-faceted issue, finding ways to support teachers is critical if we want them to stay in education.

I am sounding an alarm on behalf of our literacy instructors and students. If you're an English teacher and want to pursue professional development, it's difficult to find a grant or well-funded program to help you do so. I was lucky. I found the *Northern Plains Writing Project* when it was well-funded.

Purpose of the Writing Project

At the core of the writing project is the belief that teacher-leaders are our most effective agents of action and reform within our schools. The *NPWP* and the *RRVWP* impact teachers who teach writing across all subject areas, grades k-12. Their shared core principles are:

- We learn about teaching writing through sustained experience writing, reflecting on practice, and studying theory and research.
- We collaborate to understand how writing can be taught, not just assigned, at every grade level. When teachers become “learners,” they understand more about the process of writing, and they can work more effectively with student-writers.

The magic of the writing project is this— we write, reflect, research, demonstrate lessons, and share our voices with each other— and this is how we develop and empower ourselves and each other— building a network of support beyond our own classroom, beyond the walls of individual schools. Community like this is essential for teacher retention and deserves to be well-funded.

Impact of the Writing Project

Teachers who have this kind of community, who are informed, and effective in their practice, are likely to not only stay in education, but to become educational researchers and leaders. We build our profession this way, and in turn, we strengthen our students.

The *NPWP* and *RRVWP* restores and refreshes teachers. *NPWP* helped launch me back into my teaching career— a career I had quit after teaching for five years. I had left the profession because I was underpaid, disillusioned, and exhausted. Uncertain that I'd ever return to the classroom, I let my license expire. After a five-year-hiatus and an invitation from a colleague to return to teaching, I decided to renew my teaching license. The *NPWP* offered a fully-funded, focused and immersive practice and study of writing. The project's deep-dive into writing, as well as the network of professors and colleagues that I met, helped me develop my writing, research, sense of educational theory and best writing practices. I returned for the advanced summer institute and picked up another six credits, which eventually led to a Master's in Education with a concentration in English. I am happy to say that I am in my 23rd year of teaching and will finish a doctoral degree in English Education, specializing in writing, this May. I am indebted to *NPWP* professors and teachers who opened doors of opportunity to me.

NPWP also funded summer workshops for students (ages 7-18) in Minot and Bismarck, something I was a part of for six years. It was a teaching-writing lab— a place to try new ideas with colleagues. I can't decide what I loved more about the young writers' workshops— the students with their wild minds or co-teaching with my colleagues and sharing ideas.

The *NPWP* offers foundational, valuable approaches to teaching writing that are key to my teaching philosophy, essential to the success of students. The *NPWP* nurtured my identity as a teacher-learner, writer, and leader. I'm thankful for the financial support, joy-filled and challenging experiences, network of support, and the impact it's made in my classroom.

Empowering and supporting teacher development is one of the best things we can do for our teachers and for the students of North Dakota. On behalf of English educators and students across our state, I ask you to support the *Northern Plains Writing Project* and the *Red River Valley Project* endeavors.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Candace Brannan
English Teacher
NPWP Teacher-Consultant