

**The Writing Revolution**

***By Peg Tyre (Excerpted from 9 to 3 pages)***

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For decades, no one at New Dorp seemed to know how to help low-performing students, and unfortunately, this troubled population made up most of the school, which caters primarily to students from poor and working-class families. In 2006, 82 percent of freshmen entered the school reading below grade level. Students routinely scored poorly on the English and history Regents exams, a New York State graduation requirement: the essay questions were just too difficult. Many would simply write a sentence or two and shut the test booklet. In the spring of 2007, when administrators calculated graduation rates, they found that four out of 10 students who had started New Dorp as freshmen had dropped out, making it one of the 2,000 or so lowest-performing high schools in the nation. City officials, who had been closing comprehensive high schools all over New York and opening smaller, specialized ones in their stead, signaled that New Dorp was in the crosshairs.

And so the school’s principal, Deirdre DeAngelis, began a detailed investigation into why, ultimately, New Dorp’s students were failing. By 2008, she and her faculty had come to a singular answer: bad writing. Students’ inability to translate thoughts into coherent, well-argued sentences, paragraphs, and essays was severely impeding intellectual growth in many subjects. Consistently, one of the largest differences between failing and successful students was that only the latter could express their thoughts on the page. If nothing else, DeAngelis and her teachers decided, beginning in the fall of 2009, New Dorp students would learn to write well. “When they told me about the writing program,” Monica says, “well, I was skeptical.” With disarming candor, sharp-edged humor, and a shy smile, Monica occupies the middle ground between child and adult—she can be both naive and knowing. “On the other hand, it wasn’t like I had a choice. I go to high school. I figured I’d give it a try.”

New Dorp’s Writing Revolution, which placed an intense focus, across nearly every academic subject, on teaching the skills that underlie good analytical writing, was a dramatic departure from what most American students—especially low performers—are taught in high school. The program challenged long-held assumptions about the students and bitterly divided the staff. It also yielded extraordinary results. By the time they were sophomores, the students who had begun receiving the writing instruction as freshmen were already scoring higher on exams than any previous New Dorp class. Pass rates for the English Regents, for example, bounced from 67 percent in June 2009 to 89 percent in 2011; for the global-­history exam, pass rates rose from 64 to 75 percent. The school reduced its Regents-repeater classes—cram courses designed to help struggling students collect a graduation requirement—from five classes of 35 students to two classes of 20 students.

The number of kids enrolling in a program that allows them to take college-level classes shot up from 148 students in 2006 to 412 students last year. Most important, although the makeup of the school has remained about the same—­roughly 40 percent of students are poor, a third are Hispanic, and 12 percent are black—a greater proportion of students who enter as freshmen leave wearing a cap and gown. This spring, the graduation rate is expected to hit 80 percent, a staggering improvement over the 63 percent figure that prevailed before the Writing Revolution began. New Dorp, once the black sheep of the borough, is being held up as a model of successful school turnaround. “To be able to think critically and express that thinking, it’s where we are going,” says Dennis Walcott, New York City’s schools chancellor. “We are thrilled with what has happened there.”

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[The principal’s] decision in 2008 to focus on how teachers supported writing inside each classroom was not popular. “Most teachers,” said Nell Scharff, an instructional expert DeAngelis hired, “entered into the process with a strongly negative attitude.” They were doing their job, they told her hotly. New Dorp students were simply not smart enough to write at the high-school level. You just had to listen to the way the students talked, one teacher pointed out—they rarely communicated in full sentences, much less expressed complex thoughts. “It was my view that these kids didn’t want to engage their brains,” Fran Simmons, who teaches freshman English, told me. “They were lazy.”

Scharff, a lecturer at Baruch College, a part of the City University of New York, kept pushing, asking: “What skills that lead to good writing did struggling students lack?” She urged the teachers to focus on the largest group: well-­behaved kids like Monica who simply couldn’t seem to cobble together a paragraph. “Those kids were showing up” every day, Scharff said. “They seem to want to do well.” Gradually, the bellyaching grew fainter. “Every quiz, every unit test, every homework assignment became a new data point,” Scharff recalled. “We combed through their writing. Again and again, we asked: ‘How did the kids in our target group go wrong? What skills were missing?’ ”

Maybe the struggling students just couldn’t read, suggested one teacher. A few teachers administered informal diagnostic tests the following week and reported back. The students who couldn’t write well seemed capable, at the very least, of decoding simple sentences. A history teacher got more granular. He pointed out that the students’ sentences were short and disjointed. What words, Scharff asked, did kids who wrote solid paragraphs use that the poor writers didn’t? Good essay writers, the history teacher noted, used coordinating conjunctions to link and expand on simple ideas—words like *for*, *and*,*nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet*, and *so*. Another teacher devised a quick quiz that required students to use those conjunctions. To the astonishment of the staff, she reported that a sizable group of students could not use those simple words effectively. The harder they looked, the teachers began to realize, the harder it was to determine whether the students were smart or not—the tools they had to express their thoughts were so limited that such a judgment was nearly impossible.

The exploration continued. One teacher noted that the best-written paragraphs contained complex sentences that relied on dependent clauses like *although* and *despite*, which signal a shifting idea within the same sentence. Curious, Fran Simmons devised a little test of her own. She asked her freshman English students to read *Of Mice and Men* and, using information from the novel, answer the following prompt in a single sentence: “Although George …”

She was looking for a sentence like: *Although George worked very hard, he could not attain the American Dream*.

Some of Simmons’s students wrote a solid sentence, but many were stumped. More than a few wrote the following: “Although George and Lenny were friends.”

A lightbulb, says Simmons, went on in her head. These 14- and 15-year-olds didn’t know how to use some basic parts of speech. With such grammatical gaps, it was a wonder they learned as much as they did. “Yes, they could read simple sentences,” but works like the Gettysburg Address were beyond them—not because they were too lazy to look up words they didn’t know, but because “they were missing a crucial understanding of how language works. They didn’t understand that the key information in a sentence doesn’t always come at the beginning of that sentence.”

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Back on Staten Island, more New Dorp teachers were growing uncomfortably aware of their students’ profound deficiencies—and their own. “At teachers college, you read a lot of theory, like Paulo Freire’s*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, but don’t learn how to teach writing,” said Fran Simmons. How could the staff backfill the absent foundational skills their students needed in order to learn to write?

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To be sure, the writing program hasn’t solved all of New Dorp’s problems. The high rate of poverty makes the students vulnerable to drug abuse and violence. And in some subjects, scores on the Regents exams this year showed less growth than the teachers had hoped for. Still, word of the dramatic turnaround has spread: principals and administrators from other failing high schools as far away as Chicago have been touring New Dorp. As other schools around New York City and the nation scramble to change their curriculum to suit the Common Core standards, New Dorp teachers say they’re ready.

In a profoundly hopeful irony, New Dorp’s re­emergence as a viable institution has hinged not on a radical new innovation but on an old idea done better. The school’s success suggests that perhaps certain instructional fundamentals—fundamentals that schools have devalued or forgotten—need to be rediscovered, updated, and reintroduced. And if that can be done correctly, traditional instruction delivered by the teachers already in classrooms may turn out to be the most powerful lever we have for improving school performance after all.