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High school students benefit from Montana Writing Project

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IMMEDIATELY

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS BENEFIT
FROM MONTANA WRITING PROJECT

By Maribeth Dwyer
UM Publications and Media Relations

MISSOULA--

Part of a note written to the parents of a student by a teacher with a master's degree appeared in the June 16 issue of Time as a shocking example of the sorry state of education in some quarters.

The note is not representative of the writing of most teachers. Still, enough horror stories circulate to suggest that some barely literate teachers are loose in America's classrooms. Their presence there is one reason for the documented decline in recent years in the ability of students generally to write clearly and coherently.

Obviously, before teachers can teach Dick and Jane to write, they must be able to write themselves. How are they to learn?

The highly successful Montana Writing Project is based on the premise that teachers learn best from other teachers. It also operates on the assumption that teachers of writing must themselves write.

The Montana Writing Project started at the University of Montana in 1978. It was modeled on the Bay Area Writing Project, which had begun at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1974 and by 1978 had developed into a network of 35 projects. Now there are about 70 such projects, including Montana's, in the United States, Canada, England and the Virgin Islands.

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HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS BENEFIT--add one

Dr. Richard R. Adler, associate professor of English at the UM and director of the Montana Writing Project, said the project's purpose is to increase the effectiveness of the teaching and learning of writing at all educational levels, kindergarten through college, in the state.

He said the project accomplishes this purpose by giving successful teachers intensive instruction and practice in writing by means of institutes, workshops, professional meetings, publications and in-service training.

The process of turning superior teachers into experts in composition--experts willing to share their new knowledge with their colleagues--starts at a summer institute at the UM. Teachers who are recognized as being committed to the teaching of writing are invited to attend. At the institute they conduct workshops for each other in which they exchange information and ideas about writing technique.

Like the participants in the previous two institutes, the teachers who took part in the third, held on campus June 16 through July 11, spent hours critiquing and discussing their own and each other's writing. And they wrote and wrote and wrote.

At the close of the institute, 17 Montana teachers dispersed to all parts of the state to take up their mission. During the coming year, each will give two workshops for other teachers, and most will keep on writing.

Since its inception in 1978, the Montana Writing Project has trained as teacher-consultants 54 teachers from 50 schools in 34 towns. This far-flung corps of experts has had a beneficial effect upon the teaching and learning of writing of 1,000 teachers and 5,000 students so far.

The project's long list of credits includes 50 workshops conducted, 10 articles by teacher-consultants accepted for publication; and one teacher-consultant, Margaret Grant of Missoula, selected as one of seven teachers of writing in the United States to appear on CBS Sunrise Semester, a national television series that offers college credit through New York University.

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS BENEFIT--add two

Adler has also attracted national, and international, attention as a specialist in teaching writing, partially at least because of his association with the project. He was asked to serve as a writing consultant for schools in Pakistan, India, Nepal and Afghanistan for six weeks in 1979 and in Greece for five weeks this summer.

In November 1979, the National Council of Teachers of English appointed him to a three-year term as chairman of the council's Committee to Review Publications of Affiliates.

The Montana Writing Project is funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the UM Center for Continuing Education. It is also one of four presidential projects supported by the UM Foundation's Excellence Fund. Presidential projects are those identified by UM President Richard C. Bowers as enhancing the total academic environment of the University.

The writing project certainly does that.

It also raises the sights of teachers and students throughout Montana--shows them what good writing is and helps them achieve it.

The benefits that flow from the Montana Writing Project are felt far beyond the borders of the UM campus.

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