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Section: Local

Teachers spend summer weeks in classroom

BACKGROUND: The Northern California **Writing Project** invites experienced teachers in kindergarten through college to take part in the summer institute. **WHAT'S NEW:** Teachers spent three weeks developing their expertise in teaching writing skills.

WHAT'S NEXT: Those completing the institute will become teacher consultants, conducting professional development workshops at their own school sites.

CHRIS GULLICK/MediaNews Group

School's out for most students, but school isn't out for some teachers. When the school year ends, teachers often head for the classroom to continue their own educations.

Teachers in the north state are no exception.

A group of teachers filled a classroom at Chico State University participating in the three-week Invitational Summer Institute, part of the Northern California **Writing Project**.

They came from a lot of towns around the north state Chico, Susanville, Hamilton City, Paradise, Marysville, Corning, Oroville and other places.

They teach in many grade levels, from kindergarten to college.

The 20 teachers-turned-students listened intently one morning last week as Mary Rich, a seventh-grade teacher from Thermalito, presented her method of teaching letter-writing to her culturally-mixed classes. She explained how she used the exercise as a gateway activity to writing a persuasive essay, a seventh-grade standard.

The presentation, which Rich conducted to demonstrate a successful writing exercise, was required of all the teachers attending the institute. Each one ended with a question a real question of concern to that teacher about how to structure assignments to target specific results in student achievement.

Rich's question was "How can I encourage and support my students to be critical thinkers while respecting cultural beliefs?"

Rich, an experienced teacher, was nominated to attend the project by an alumnus, a prerequisite to acceptance. About 40 nominees applied to the program this summer and only 20 could be accepted. Once they attend the institute, they become teacher consultants at their school sites.

The teachers prepare for leadership roles by sharing effective teaching methods, studying research and improving their

own writing skills. Following the institute, many of them conduct writing workshops for teachers at their own schools.

Co-director Cathy Wainwright, a Chico second-grade teacher at Hooker Oak School, first took part in the **writing project** in 1991. She became a teacher consultant and started organizing inservice workshops in several Northern California counties. Seven years ago she became one of the project's co-directors, along with Tom Fox, a professor at Chico State, and Peter Kittle, adviser for Chico State's English Education program.

"At the heart of the project," Wainwright explained, "is teachers teaching teachers."

Wainwright stressed that all teachers who come to the summer institute are veteran teachers. It's not a training program, she said, but professional development.

"I'm able to listen to a range of teachers from a range of grade levels," she continued. And because it is a k-14 program, she said, something happens that doesn't happen in a grade-level training a transfer of information which encourages teachers to examine their own teaching practices more reflectively.

The group also included teachers of subjects not traditionally known as writing intensive, such as Amanda Von Kleist, a special education teacher from Hamilton City High School, and Brad Martin, a science teacher from Corning High School.

Martin described the way he discovered that writing in science classes promotes learning. He explained that even in a fact-based subject like biology, students develop their understanding of the subject by writing about it.

Suzanne Stirling, from Taylorsville Elementary School in Plumas School District, presented a poetry-writing assignment sequence, which she used in her fifth/sixth-grade combination class. Listening comprehension is a standard for that grade level, she added, and poetry enhances listening skills.

She concluded with the question "How can we teachers of writing construct assignments that allow our students to get in touch with that which they feel passionate about?"

The question was answered individually in writing, but an animated conversation ensued as well.

Wainwright asked her, "How do you talk about tone with your students?"

Stirling answered, using examples of her students' poetry to illustrate which students "got it" and which ones didn't. Others joined in with ideas of ways to talk about writing "tone."

Mark Hall, a university instructor taking part in the **writing project**, pointed out that writing doesn't necessarily result from passion, but from knowledge. He claimed that knowledge is a more valuable teaching tool than passion, quoting Hemmingway, "Write what you know."

After the session ended, second-grade teacher Molly McKay, from Kynoch Elementary in Marysville, said she could use these ideas in her own class. "Every single person has had something I can use. Every single one," she insisted.

The institute works to improve writing skills and has been offered at Chico State for the past 28 years, Fox said.

He explained that the summer institute is one of about 50 programs in the Northern California **Writing Project**. Others are designed to meet specific needs in communities throughout the north state.

The National **Writing Project** is federally funded, independent from any commercial or political group, with 189 sites at universities throughout the 50 states, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands and Washington, D.C.

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