Challenges for Struggling Writers

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MICCA 2005
“Written Language is the most complex aspect of the language arts.”

Morris and Crump 1982
Writing Involves Many Skills

• Handwriting: the physical act of getting words on paper.
• Generation of ideas
• Organization of ideas
• Word Retrieval
• Grammatical structures
• Sentence construction
• Knowledge of the reader’s perspective
• Editing
Struggling Writers

- Vary in their strengths and challenges.
- Need to be thoroughly evaluated to identify where support is needed.
- Often are aware of their problems and become discouraged reluctant writers.
Challenges For Struggling Writers in Composition

- Have more difficulty with composition.
- Distort word order, omit words.
- Use incorrect verbs, pronouns, and word endings.
- Have more difficulty with expository writing.
- Have deficits in working memory.
Composition Challenges (Cont.)

- Sentences are shorter and the number of sentences are fewer.
- Have more difficulty with organization and planning and spend less time on these activities.
- Are often the first one done and do not spend time editing.
- Work strays from topic.
Challenges in Mechanics

• Spelling.
  – Choose words that are safe and easy to spell.
  – Difficulty applying spelling rules.
  – Problems with spell checkers.
    • Student cannot recognize the correctly spelled word in the list.
    • Word is so poorly spelled that the spell checker cannot identify the desired word.

• Capitalization and punctuation errors are frequent.
• Little variety in sentence structure.
Use of a Word Processor
Studies Have Shown That:

• Word processing does not impede the writing process.
• It does not interfere with idea generation.
• Students are more interested in the writing process.
• Editing becomes less painful because there is no recopying to be done.
• Students take more risks with words and length of composition when the revisions are easier.
Important Points

- Technology will not solve the problems alone.
- Good teaching strategies must also be included.
- Students must be taught the skills to use technology.
- Sitting a child in front of a word processor does not make them instantly competent.
Current Demands

- Increased writing in very early years.
- More time spent on composing and copying.
- Less time spent on handwriting.

- Increased writing demands at all grade levels.
- High stakes testing.
- Writing competencies to graduate from high school.
Assessments Must Evaluate:

- Handwriting
  - Speed
  - Legibility
  - Endurance
- Keyboarding
  - Speed
  - Accuracy
  - Endurance
- Spelling
- Writing traits
  - Ideas
  - Organization
  - Voice
  - Word choice
  - Sentence fluency
  - Comparison to typical performance
Handwriting Issues

Not a problem when:
- It is legible to an unfamiliar reader.
- The student can keep up with the pace of the peers in the classroom.
- The student can keep pace with his/her expression of ideas.

Is a problem when:
- It is illegible to an unfamiliar reader.
- The student cannot keep pace with peers.
- The student is unable to keep pace with his/her expression of ideas.
- When student has difficulty with endurance for longer assignments.
Keyboarding Issues

• If handwriting speeds are considerably faster than typing then the keyboard is not an efficient tool.

• Regular daily practice in keyboarding with a structured program can yield good results.

• It is most effective if the student is practicing both at home and school.
Keyboarding Issues (Cont.)

• A composition speed of 6-10 words per minute is sufficient for an elementary school student. Studies have shown that the average adult composition speed is 18 words per minute.
• Using a keyboard to take notes is a different skill than using a keyboard to compose.
• Learning to compose on the computer versus paper is a new skill and must be given time to develop.
Tools and Techniques That Can Help With Spelling

- Personal Dictionary
- Word Wall
- Franklin Spell Checker
- Word Spell Check
- Talking Word Processor
- Word Prediction Software
Tools and Techniques That Can Help With Organization and Composition

- Graphic organizers
- Inspiration/Kidspiration
- Draft builder
- Features on Microsoft word- reading level, find and replace, thesaurus
Tools and Techniques That Can Help With Sentence Structure

• Draft Builder
• Microsoft word grammar check
• Talking word processors
• Intellitalk 3 or Clicker 4 with word pallets
• Intellikeys with structured overlays
Tools and Techniques That Can Help With the Physical Act of Writing

- Slant board
- Pencil grips
- Vertical surface
- Trackball
- Intellikeys
- Keyboarding devices
- Computers
Tools and Techniques That Can Help With Keyboarding

• Computer keyboarding programs
• Keyboarding programs on devices such as the writer and neo.
• Typing books
Summary

• There are many challenges for struggling writers.
• It is important to identify what the issues are for a particular student.
• There are many low tech and high tech tools to help these students.