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WINCHESTER TEACHERS GO BACK TO THE CLASSROOM WFEE Grants Target Writing Skills

More than 50 Winchester teachers spent their first week of summer vacation learning new skills designed to help them improve student writing. Two grants from the Winchester Foundation for Educational Excellence funded training for elementary teachers across the entire district. "People are excited about writing," says grant recipient Jillian Dwyer. "After the summer training they feel more confident about their own skills."

Learning to write in a clear, organized and compelling way is one of the most important skills Winchester students must master. Teachers begin laying the foundation in kindergarten even as some students are still working on their printing skills. To help teachers of the youngest elementary students, WFEE brought a presenter from Columbia University's Lucy Calkins Writing Program in New York to run a Winchester "Home Grown Institute." "This is a phenomenal program," believes Lynch 1st grade teacher Katie Malone. Malone wrote the WFEE grant that paid for the Calkins training. The Calkins training focuses on getting students to write every day, drawing on their own lives for inspiration. "Kids are self centered, they love to write about themselves," says Malone. Encouraging students to write about the "small moments" of their lives is a Calkins strategy to make children feel comfortable as writers.

That strategy is reinforced as students become more sophisticated writers, faced with the 4th grade MCAS long composition test. "Writing instruction is often vague," maintains 4th grade teacher Jillian Dwyer. Research led Dwyer to the Empowering Writers curriculum which she believes is extremely strong. "This program helps with the specifics and encourages students to find their own voice." With support from the school administration, Dwyer requested a WFEE grant to bring master teachers of the Empowering Writers curriculum to Winchester. Teachers from each elementary school attended the June training and will be implementing new strategies at all elementary schools this fall.

Improving early literacy was a major focus of WFEE's 2008-2009 grant program. Nearly half of the professional development grants for the coming year focus directly on introducing teachers to innovative and exciting approaches to reading and writing, the foundation skills for an excellent education. Thanks to the generosity of its donors in 2008, WFEE has granted more than \$107,000 to teachers across Winchester who this year will be striving for excellence and innovation in their classrooms.

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