



## Partnering for Literacy Impact

Susan Matloff-Nieves & Rebecca Wallace-Segall

All young people have stories to tell. Yet when children and teens declare that they hate writing or are too embarrassed to admit they like it, elevating their voices becomes challenging. It is urgent that educators, policy makers, youth development workers and leaders, and philanthropists work together to find a way.

In 2018, only 36 percent of black middle schoolers and 38 percent of Latinx middle schoolers in New York City were proficient in English language arts, compared to 74 percent of White middle schoolers (Domanico, 2018). Since then, the achievement gap has deepened nationwide, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2021). In the land of free speech, far too many lack the skill to exercise that basic, human,

American right. The reasons are complex and systemic, and the resulting reluctance to read and write during free time further widens the skills gap.

The good news: taking on this challenge can be life-changing for all involved.

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Our story shows how two nonprofits with distinct but overlapping missions partnered to better address the literacy needs of our city's youth. We brought to the partnership a shared vision and radical empathy for the other. We had the support of a steadfast funder. Marrying each organization's reach and expertise, both organizations improved. More importantly, our partnership empowered young people to find joy and fulfillment in writing.

## Taking a Risk

In *Emergent Strategy*, adrienne maree brown (2017) challenges people to create, on the smallest level, what they wish to see in the larger society. For us, that meant taking the risk to trust each other so we could build robust, far-reaching youth literacy programming—together.

Goddard Riverside, where Susan is deputy executive director, is a large, holistic, multiservice agency with decades of broad and deep reach into underserved communities of the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Writopia Lab, Rebecca's organization, is a creative writing youth development nonprofit based in several large cities nationwide including New York. Beginning in 2016, a shared funder, the Pinkerton Foundation, brought us together to explore ways we could partner for greater impact. Our program officer, Erickson Blakney, noted the synergy between our organizations. He encouraged us to look at ways to support each other's work by leveraging our separate strengths and collaborating more closely. Motivated by a trust in our expertise and vision and a belief in giving space to changemakers to take risks in order to pursue change, the foundation allowed us, from that point onward, to develop and modify our own plan.

We were thrilled to have this opportunity. But fear also crept in. Each organization would need to make space for the other's unique set of concerns. Learning requires vulnerability—an openness to missteps, an acknowledgment that we have room to grow. As the leader of Writopia Lab, Rebecca feared that Susan or her team might feel imposed upon by the funder and resent the partnership. Meanwhile, Susan was grateful for the resources Writopia Lab of-

fered to Goddard participants but feared that her staff would reject the idea that their participants would *want* to write as part of an afterschool program. Our willingness to take a risk to trust each other called upon the same resilience we were expecting of young people. We ask program participants to trust both our staff and their own abilities so they can push themselves to engage in writing. We decided to trust each other, our staffs, and the abilities of both nonprofits.

Goddard Riverside brought to the partnership a multi-decade history of youth work and embeddedness in the community. Writopia Lab brought a social-emotional approach to teaching writing that had, for more than a decade, transformed thousands of reluctant writers into enthusiastic ones. Both organizations brought a culture of inquiry for program improvement. Writopia Lab was already running writing workshops at several Goddard sites; nearly 30 participants had been ignited by a love of writing anything from short stories and graphic novels to college essays.

But we and our funding partner knew we could go both deeper and broader. If we strengthened the principles and goals of our partnership and worked to codify, replicate, and evaluate the partnership model, we could institutionalize the model to further develop a positive literacy culture in the Goddard Riverside afterschool programs. We hoped that, ultimately, this model could influence the whole youth development field.

Hence, the Positive Literacy Collaborative was born. We use the word *collaborative* intentionally as defined by a Harvard and Tufts research team: "Compared to cooperation and coordination, collaboration is less transactional and more transformational" (Samali et al., 2016). That was exactly what we wanted: to transcend the business-like relationships that typically define partnerships to move into the realm of wholehearted connection to each other, our teams, and the youth we serve. Brené Brown's (2013) work on vulnerability applies to every moment of our work together. By seeking each other out as partners, we each acknowledge both

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our own limited scope as just one person and our organization's limited scope as just one organization working to transform young people's lives.

Our partnership evolved over the years. In the earliest iteration, Writopia ran weekly programs at Goddard sites throughout the school year, meeting with about 10 children per group, once per week, for 1.5 hours at a time. Instructors inspired writers with open-ended, original writing games and prompts. Ultimately they helped writers articulate and meet their own writing goals, like completing a short story or creating a graphic novel. In years 2 and 3, Writopia staff worked with Goddard leaders to identify which line staffers would serve as the best literacy mentors to work side by side with Writopia staff. Then, from 2019 to 2022, with support from the Pinkerton Foundation, Goddard Riverside and Writopia took the partnership to the next level. We jointly hired a Writopia-trained staff member to embed in afterschool programs while meeting periodically as senior leaders to begin the process of articulating and defining best practices.

The potential impact of our partnership was more important than the vulnerabilities it brought to light. For decades, we both served on the front lines in battling the literacy crisis in our community. We needed to join forces to tackle the crisis together to increase our efficiency, effectiveness, and impact. Together, we could reach more children, create new pathways for them, and share our stories with those who can expand the work further. We also would enjoy having a partner with whom we could witness the meaningfulness of the work.

## What the Partners Brought

The prior experience that Goddard Riverside and Writopia Lab brought, along with our openness to learning from each other, set the partnership up for success in fostering literacy among program participants.

### *Goddard Riverside's Culture of Literacy and Learning*

Goddard Riverside has long worked to embed a literacy culture into youth programming. As Roy Baptiste, afterschool director, constantly points out, one key role of youth programs in promoting literacy is to foster a love of reading. Years ago, Goddard participated in a library development and literacy support project funded by a local foundation. Regular meetings with staff from other programs interested in developing their literacy programs, facilitated by an experienced educator, helped staff to become comfortable leading literacy activities with children. Staff at one Goddard site embraced a program that trained them to run engaging book clubs.

They are adept at leading shared reading with discussion and regularly explore themes related to social justice. Staff also draw connections between popular culture and literature—for instance, comparing Marvel movies with Madeleine L'Engle's classic science fiction novel *A Wrinkle in Time*. Reading in groups fosters peer support and reinforces a pro-literacy culture.

For children who struggle with reading and writing, Goddard sites offer targeted tutoring supervised by a reading specialist and implemented with the help of volunteers recruited from local schools and the community. Some children and tutors create bonds that last for years. These and other interactions have taught Susan and her staff that relationships are a key strategy for developing a love of language. Feeling close to a caring adult and friendly peers enhances and reinforces the experience of reading and writing. Reading groups tie the power of literacy to the relationships fostered by the afterschool community.

A core principle of a culture of literacy is giving children access to an ample supply of varied and engaging literature. Every Goddard site has a circulating library. In addition to the library development grant mentioned above, Goddard has benefited from long-standing relationships with the publishing industry. An annual book fair, which offers books donated by publishers for sale at half price to the public, raises money for Goddard programs. This major local event attracts a wide variety of shoppers, from wealthy residents to clients of the agency who pull quarters from their pockets to pay for books. Leftover items are distributed to sites to refresh their libraries or are given to participants for home libraries.

Through these efforts, Susan and her team found that, although some staff were comfortable with literacy activities, others brought negative past experiences with formal schooling and anxiety about their capabilities. The literacy and book club staff development programs have helped, establishing a staff culture of learning and inquiry. To reach the next level, Goddard Riverside needed a partner like Writopia Lab.

### *Writopia Lab's Culture of Joy*

According to Graham and Perin (2007), writing makes better readers—and thinkers and learners. Writopia Lab's own data bear out this idea. In one recent survey, 90 percent of parents of self-identified reluctant writers at Writopia Lab reported that their children became more engaged in both writing and reading by the program's end.

Writopia Lab partners with local community-based organizations and schools to bring its model of process-oriented writing labs to children and youth of all ages. The program inspires participants as both consumers and creators of language. Children and teens cheer as their instructors enter classrooms. Writopia's mission is "to foster joy, literacy, and critical thinking in all youth through creative writing workshops." Note that joy comes first. In the current historically and culturally fraught literacy sphere, Writopia Lab contends that transformative impact can occur only when participants are galvanized by the pursuit of happiness (Sheeler, 2021). Indeed, there is a well-established link between joyful play and academic and social-emotional growth (Fisher et al., 2013).

The joy-based training model has three basic tenets: role modeling, critical affirmations, and public celebration. First, Writopia instructors lead staff on a journey to finding their own voices through a series of writing games and exercises. These training workshops aim both to bring joy to staff and to prepare them to support the establishment of a positive literacy culture at their sites.

Only when the adults in the room harbor positive feelings about writing can they begin the work with youth. The next step in Writopia's method calls for the trained program staff and Writopia writing instructors to co-facilitate workshops. These facilitators have learned to celebrate self-expression from the very first risk a student takes by, for example, laughing easily and openly in response to all text that is meant to be funny or letting themselves be deeply moved by riveting personal writing. Writopia trains staff to give constructive feedback only after writers are sitting firmly in their work. On the first day of workshop, youths engage in playful collaborative story writing exercises or "games," followed by instructive, individualized exercises that culminate in the establishment of short-term and long-term writing goals. Instructors check in with each writer during each session about their goals, offering specific, student-centered guidance on moving forward toward each goal incrementally. For the program staff, working with a partner boosts confidence and energy from a skilled role model.

Ultimately, the Writopia Lab model turns writers into rock stars by putting them on stage in presenta-

tions, productions, and publishing parties. Writopia staff collaborate with Goddard program staff to encourage attendance at these events by the largest possible audience. Younger participants witness literary stardom and ask to take part the following year.

When the focus rests on process rather than product, the joy of writing lends itself to improvement of both social-emotional and literacy skills. In 2019, Writopia Lab measured the impact of its work in a Title I school in the Bronx. Students—particularly those with the highest needs—showed remarkable gains across the board: 97 percent improved in one or more of these social-emotional skills: positive identity, self-management, academic self-efficacy, social skills, and social capital. A study of literacy impacts conducted by the Columbia University School of Social Work (Arduini et al., 2019) found that Writopia Lab's creative writing workshops had strong literacy impact on 22 students at a Title I school in Harlem. Students improved substantially in every single Common Core category, from control of conventions to syntax and coherence (Arduini et al., 2019).

Anecdotally, Writopia Lab staff have seen how their work transforms lives. A family court employee shared a story about an adjudicated teen in a residential treatment facility who participated in a Writopia workshop. When

asked by the judge what progress he had made, the teen said that he had written a play exploring family and addiction that was selected for production by Writopia's Worldwide Play Festival, an annual festival of professional productions of youths' works. The judge, who was described by a clerk as typically stern, became genuinely happy. Similarly, in work with Homes for the Homeless, Writopia Lab staff overcame youth participants' initial reticence, transforming their site into a creative, voice-affirming space peppered with regular literary presentations, play productions, and publishing parties. Time and time again, Writopia staff have seen tweens and teens grow in their self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, preparedness for high school, and literacy skills.

## Making Writing Cool

Rebecca and her Writopia team entered Goddard's spaces in 2016 poised to show Goddard's young readers that they are also young writers, filled with many

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stories. We wanted to offer both staff and participants who felt resistant to literacy, and particularly to writing, another way in. We were obsessed with this idea: How can we make writing cool? From Writopia Lab's perspective, the answer is simple: through intentional role modeling, critical affirmation, and public celebration. The principles are simple, but the execution is demanding.

Initially, as Susan predicted, some Goddard staff were hesitant. "Our children aren't interested in more writing. They already do so much for school and won't want to do it," one staffer shared. Many of these staff members carried their own trauma related to writing and wanted to protect their kids from negative experiences. Both partners knew that many staff and participants had been devastated by teachers' red pens and eye rolls conveying the message that the English of their homes was bad English. Teachers of children for whom English is a second language often focus on the deficits of their English mastery rather than on their remarkable ability to tell their stories in two languages. Both partners also brought to the work an understanding that some staff and participants likely had undiagnosed learning disabilities. These barriers could be overcome with the useful strategies Writopia had to offer.

Overcoming past negative experiences with literacy requires addressing both organizational culture and individual identity. Goddard Riverside drew upon past positive history with organizational learning and placed its most enthusiastic and charismatic staff on the initiative. The initial resistance to writing programs was a formidable barrier, but Writopia staff members have worked for over a decade with both young people and adults who have experienced trauma around writing.

At the first meeting with about 15 Goddard staff members, Writopia Lab's trainers situated everyone in a circle and started the session by turning a typically anxious conversation about the idea of writing on its head. They asked staffers to share a time when writing served as a powerful tool in their lives. "You can share anything from a time you used writing to get out your feelings and rant, or a time you wrote an effective email, or a poem, a school paper, a short story, anything," they said. Despite the many negative experiences the Goddard staff members had had

around writing, the group immediately began sharing inspiring stories, each participant beaming or laughing as they remembered their valedictorian speech or a rant-y poem series they wrote after a breakup. Writopia Lab finds, time and time again, that nearly everyone has a story of this kind to share, no matter their academic experience or level. After sharing the positive stories, participants were invited to share stories of pain regarding writing. These training spaces are filled with empathic listeners, modeled by Writopia staff.

The tone was set, and the staff participants were poised to take a risk by trying some reflective or creative writing. Within 20 minutes, they were sharing their short writing bursts with the group, and their peers were responding with gasps and snaps. Through ongoing writing workshops with Goddard staff, Writopia has addressed both the creation of positive culture and the strengthening of individual identity that are integral to its strategy for tackling the literacy challenge.

### **Finding Credible Messengers**

Finding champions at Goddard who were unafraid of writing and could model enthusiasm for it was key. Recognizing that leaders emerge from all levels of an organization, Susan and her team identified two. The first was a site program director who loved writing and embraced opportunities to create a rich literacy environment through staff development.

The other was Walter, a college student who worked in the afterschool program as a group leader. Having excelled at giving his group a safe environment, help with homework, and opportunities for engagement and support, he was ready for a challenge. His confidence in his own literacy skills was reinforced by his positive experience with higher education and by strongly supportive home and work environments.

While he had not previously been exposed to Writopia Lab workshops, he embraced the opportunity to train with Writopia Lab specialists. The Writopia practice-what-you-preach framework encourages instructors to engage in Writopia instructional methods as students before integrating these methods into their teaching practice. So Walter reflected, imagined, and wrote with the Writopia Lab team before he set out to bring his extended skill set to the children and teens at God-

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dard with Writopia staff. Walter's self-confidence and gregarious warmth were elements of his program leadership that inspired staff and youth interest. In order to encourage enrollment, the Goddard site slotted the writing group into a choice activity rotation that was already on the schedule, with one group for elementary children and middle schoolers and a separate program in which high school seniors could work on their college essays.

As a result of the integration into the programming schedule, Walter's enthusiasm, and the structured support of Writopia Lab, groups of children and teens engaged willingly in their workshops. Walter's openness to creative challenge served as a model for the children, and the joy he emanated reinforced writing as joyous exploration of self-expression.

As the first year came to an end, we began to see the same impact Writopia workshops had fostered at other program sites. In year 2, we imagined together ways to bring lasting change. "Can we hang photographs of kids in the act of writing on the walls?" Rebecca asked Susan. Soon we were planning an array of pro-literacy decorations to line the walls of writing rooms at Goddard sites. Susan's staff made space for the posters and asked for images that would reflect the multigenerational nature of their programming. Writopia provided images of children and young adults reading their works that appealed to multiple age groups and populations.

In 2019, our three-year funding cycle was coming to an end. We saw the timeline as an opportunity to reflect and redesign the initiative with programmatic sustainability and sector-wide impact in mind.

### **Building a Positive Culture**

So came phase 2. Just as the previous funding cycle ended, Goddard and Writopia won additional Pinkerton funding to further develop and share our work throughout the youth development sector. For the next three years we added three elements to our funded partnership: an embedded Writopia staffer into the Goddard staff; a cross-organizational teen internship program; and a chance to take the time to reflect, write, and submit our work to journals and conferences.

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### **Finding the Right Staff**

We designed the Positive Literacy Collaborative to allow us to embed a Writopia instructor into the Goddard staffing structure. In order to create program-wide momentum toward a positive writing culture, we invited all Goddard line staffers, program managers, and program directors to train in the Writopia method if they chose. The ongoing presence of a shared staff member, fully supported by a leadership team that deeply understood the needs, philosophy, and goals of both organizations, would firmly embed the literacy culture and Writopia practices in Goddard programs. We sent in our grant application and then embraced our wonderings and worries about what we hoped was to come.

The vision was exciting to both of us. But, in all honesty, the idea of finding one instructor who met all of both organizations' criteria seemed idealistic, if not naive. Could we find an instructor who could meet the needs of children and teens who had painful associations with writing? Would they have the expertise required of a high-level, authentic creative writing instructor? Would we be able to communicate with enough clarity so that they wouldn't get hopelessly lost navigating the instructions of both institutions? As was the case with the entry into the first Goddard site, finding the right champion was key.

Writopia staff shared their standard job listing and approach for hiring writing instructors with Goddard's hiring team, including the values and traits they look for when hiring. Goddard launched the search and conducted the first interviews; Writopia conducted the last interviews.

Together our two organizations decided on the final hire: the fabulous Jane Y. Where other people might have been put off by the complex vision of the program, Jane loved the notion of working with—and learning from—both organizations in support of the underserved youth who attend Goddard's programs. She was a produced playwright and a highly experienced teaching artist in low-income communities. Jane was our magical person, combining writing expertise with knowledge of young people. Now she would be trained at Writopia and then teach at Goddard for the entire school year.

## **Strengthening Culture and Identity Despite Adversity**

The first year of Jane's tenure was a fabulous practice round, as Jane joyfully and thoughtfully navigated both organizations. Little did we know what we were preparing for: the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of Writopia Lab's partner programs stopped their literacy endeavors in the face of profound health and economic crises, but Goddard Riverside continued its program through the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 school years. Having an embedded Writopia staff member made it easier for Goddard Riverside to respond to local emergencies *and* keep the essential pieces of literacy programming together—without having to spend time communicating, planning, and staffing with a partner organization. During lockdown, Jane was able to seamlessly move to the online space to conduct writing workshops with our city's most vulnerable youth, participating in team meetings with the Goddard program staff. As in-person activities resumed with COVID restrictions, her status as a member of the Goddard staff ensured her continuing presence.

One child who benefited was eight-year-old "Alicia." As a child with special needs, Alicia lost most of her services during lockdown; she had only about an hour of online school per day. "I'm scared of her joining a writing workshop," her mother whispered to Rebecca over the phone. "She was behind a year in writing at the onset of the pandemic, and she rarely speaks to anyone besides her family ... and now it's all gotten worse." Rebecca promised her that Jane was warm and supportive, that she would help Alicia and never shame her. A few weeks later Rebecca received an excited email from Jane:

We had a breakthrough with Alicia yesterday! We were playing Character Hot Seat [a role-playing character interrogation game] and she started making hilarious comments about her real family. Our raucous laughter then seemed to encourage her. So she opened up and began talking in a loud, clear, confident voice I'd never heard her use, AND she was speaking without being prompted. [The other staff member] and I were thrilled! ... When math started, I stuck around to observe. That confidence was still there in Alicia's voice. It was such a beautiful thing to witness, I had to share it with you.

Despite her previous difficulties and a worldwide education crisis, Alicia had a creative outlet in which she could find her voice and its connection to literacy.

The world had gone on pause, but our partnership gave Alicia a place to grow.

## **Why It Worked**

The partnership between Goddard Riverside and Writopia Lab was complex, and implementation wasn't always easy. With the support of our visionary funder, we learned a lot about what is required to change organizational culture and individual identity. Our success so far rests on two keys: relationships and the right champions.

## **Partner and Funding Relationships**

Partnerships for collaborative work with youth have the same essential requirements as any other relationship. They must be based in mutual respect and in ethical and respectful behavior. Both parties must have something to offer and something to gain; relationships of equality are most productive. An open mind toward learning from each other and flexibility toward the other result in rich rewards. The Harvard and Tufts team suggests that collaborating organizations "Be agnostic on the 'how'" of partnership (Samali et al., 2016). Organizations must remain open and flexible in order to learn as much as possible from the process and to reshape plans productively as needed. Trust and mutual respect provide the space for self-directed change to emerge, whether it is at the organizational or the individual level.

What we found most important was a sustained willingness to treat each other with kindness. We began with a common appreciation for a holistic approach to youth work. Our organizations brought complementary strengths. Goddard Riverside had broad reach into the community and a multi-decade history of youth work. Writopia Lab brought expertise in teaching writing to young people of all ages and a team of passionate content specialists. Each of us, Susan and Rebecca, brought a desire to support each other's work and further each other's success, building on our organizations' previous work together. From an informal discussion in 2019 of how we could continue our work together and further our impact in the field came the idea of documenting our experiences and disseminating what we are learning. We started writing monthly summaries of our lessons learned with the plan of sharing them in publications like this one and at conferences including the 2022 New York State Network for Youth Success. Rebecca and the Writopia team also are developing two books for schools and nonprofit orga-

nizations who want a step-by-step guide to creating positive literacy culture and workshops.

### **The Right Internal Champions**

Finding good-fit staff is key. Staff members must have an empowering and positive attitude toward young people. They need to have faith in their abilities and be competent writers and teachers. They must be able to convey enthusiasm, warmth, and a genuine belief that children can write when given the right encouragement and space. They must be confident enough to handle the vulnerability that learning requires. They must be willing to take risks, and they need heart as well as ability.

“A company that cannot self-correct, cannot thrive,” says Carol Dweck, the leader in growth mindset thinking (2006, p.109). Youth development leaders are deeply inspired by Dweck’s thinking when it comes to youth. It isn’t always easy to remember to apply the same mindset to ourselves. Collaborations can be complicated, but they can also be a foundation for growth and for the development of durable and resilient specialized programming. For Dweck, the most meaningful, transformational work should leave you saying, “This is hard. This is fun.” That is exactly what we want our young people to say about writing. And that is exactly what we can say about partnering for impact.

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