



Oak Park Elementary School District 97

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TO: Dr. Carol Kelley, Superintendent
District 97 Board of Education

FROM: Dr. Helen Wei, Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment
Dr. Amy Warke, Chief Academic and Accountability Officer

RE: *Writing Units of Study* Update

DATE: December 20, 2016

Type of Report: Informational

Purpose of the Report: The purpose of this report is to provide the Board of Education with an update on *Writing Units of Study* implementation, and recommendations for K-5 literacy instruction for the 2017-2018 school year.

Background Information

The District 97 Board of Education approved the purchase of *Writing Units of Study in Opinion/Argument, Information, and Narrative Writing* from the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University. The district distributed teacher kits (unit books, resource books, and trade books) to every K-5 teacher of writing before the end of the school year (Spring 2016), so teachers could familiarize themselves with the materials over the summer. Beginning in June, we also offered half-day professional learning sessions, “Getting Started with Writing Workshop/Units of Study,” for which teachers were able to sign up and attend on a voluntary basis. This professional learning was offered eight times over the summer, in order to maximize convenience for teachers’ summer schedules. In return, teachers gained back a half-day of writing preparation time during an August Institute Day. Approximately 250 of our 300 K-5 teachers who teach writing participated over the summer. Teachers who were not able to attend a session over the summer participated in the half-day professional learning sessions on an August Institute Day.

2016-17 School Year Professional Learning for Teachers and Staff

Job-embedded Learning

We have partnered with two external coaches, Lisa Vahey and Clare Donovan-Scane, who began coaching a cohort of teachers at each elementary school in September. Lisa Vahey has been coaching teachers at Beye, Irving and Whittier while Clare Donovan-Scane has been coaching teachers at Hatch, Holmes, Lincoln, Longfellow, and Mann.

Principals worked with Ms. Vahey and Ms. Donovan-Scane to carefully develop criteria to help each school make strong choices in selecting teachers to engage in this intensive coaching experience. By February, the external coaches will have visited each school a total of six times, and will transition their coaching support to the school-based instructional coaches and principals in February.

During their coaching visits, Ms. Vahey and Ms. Donovan-Scane have been modeling lessons using the *Writing Units of Study*, including mini-lessons and conferring. Additionally, they have been providing observational and coaching feedback and support to teachers, and meeting to co-plan and look at student writing with individual and teams of teachers. During each visit, they also have been working with the building instructional coaches and principals, and talking through ideas for capacity-building.

After-school Professional Learning Sessions

Beginning in September, we have been offering after-school professional learning sessions with monthly topics, on two or three different days per month. Teachers may sign up and attend these sessions, as a means of additional support. Facilitated by Rachel Dahl or Clare Donovan-Scane, the professional learning sessions offered so far have included:

SEPTEMBER: Routines and Procedures in the Writing Workshop Classroom

Learn how to institute the systems that make it more likely your students will sustain rigorous work independently.

OCTOBER: Mini-lesson Deep Dive

Learn more about the methods that drive effective mini-lessons and raise the effectiveness of your instruction.

NOVEMBER: Work Time Deep Dive - Individual and Small Group Conferencing

Learn how to share strong and individualized feedback and instruction to students through conferences.

DECEMBER: Using Mentor Texts Effectively

Learn about selecting exemplar mentor texts as well as creating your own mentor text writing pieces to utilize as part of your instruction.

These after-school professional learning sessions will continue through the end of the school year.

Attendance at the professional learning sessions was high at the beginning of the school year, with the maximum of thirty participants for each session being met and leading to the opening of a third section. As the school year has progressed, attendance has tapered off, though teachers who have been able to attend have cited how helpful the sessions have been. Based on exit tickets from each session, the average rating of the sessions' effectiveness has been 3.4 out of 4 points. Additionally, in the exit tickets, some of the feedback has included:

"Discussion of conferencing--how to pull groups, manage, and confer was very helpful. Watching video examples helps to visualize what a mini-lesson or conference should look like."

"It is helpful to hear from other teachers in the district about what they're doing."

"Seeing videos, generating ideas for management, and connecting each student's focus for the day to a part of the checklist [were helpful.]"

Feedback from a recent teacher survey on these professional learning sessions have included:

"Very useful - organized and a great balance between concrete helpful tips, videos of successful teaching with WUOS, interaction with other teachers as well as with presenter. Helpful and worthwhile!"

"I have enjoyed them. I have attended 3, and they have all been beneficial for different reasons."

"I really enjoyed the session about mentor texts. I felt like I left with solid ideas and plans I can use with my class."

"I've actually found them very helpful to collaborate and have learned a lot more about how to implement the units of study."

Suggestions for how to improve these professional learning sessions from both exit tickets and the teacher survey included offering sessions to more targeted grade level groups or bands (e.g. K-2 and 3-5), filming the sessions to share with teachers unable to attend, and offering the sessions on a Wednesday after-school planning day or Institute Day.

Based on this feedback, and taking more recent attendance into consideration, we are looking into providing professional learning sessions on a Wednesday during after-school planning, as well as

offering K-2 and 3-5 sessions that will better target the needs of the grade levels. In addition, we have filmed some of the sessions offered so far, and will post them for teachers soon after winter break.

School-based Grade Level Team Planning Meetings

Eight after-school Wednesday meeting times have been designated as *Writing Units of Study* planning meetings, during which school-based grade level teams plan collaboratively. Teams are able to tailor this time to their needs, and may include activities such as reading through upcoming lessons, looking at student work together, and/or discussing their pacing as a grade-level team. A guiding document of suggestions for how to use this time has been developed, to support grade level team leaders. Some principals have even designed school-wide experiences during this time to help support and drive the writing work in their building. Three planning meetings have taken place in 2016, and five more are scheduled in 2017. In addition, we are providing targeted after-school professional learning sessions in January 2017 to continue to support grade level team leaders and instructional coaches, as they lead their peers in this important work.

Administrator and Instructional Coaches Professional Learning

Principals, assistant principals, and instructional coaches participated in a professional learning session with Lisa Vahey, Rachel Dahl, and Clare Donovan-Scane in May 2016, to prepare for the 2016-2017 roll out of the *Writing Units Study*. Some administrators and instructional coaches also attended the “Getting Started” professional learning sessions with teachers during the summer.

We have also held two professional learning opportunities for administrators and coaches during the school year. In November, Lisa Vahey and Clare Donovan-Scane facilitated a professional learning session for principals, district administrators, and instructional coaches, *Using Demonstration Lessons to Build Capacity*. In two teams, participants visited a classroom during writing workshop time, took observational notes and wonderings, and then debriefed with the observed teacher using a protocol. Participants learned how to use the protocol with their teachers to lead peer observations and learn from one another’s expertise. This session received an average score of 3.7/4 on our three exit ticket questions and almost every comment included a note about how the shared observation and protocol experience was valuable in supporting leadership learning and growth.

In December, a voluntary after-school session was offered to administrators, instructional coaches, and language arts specialists, *Leading Implementation of the Units of Study*. During the session, participants learned how looking at student work is a powerful tool to learn about their students, and that building relationships with their students through conferring is an effective way to move and grow writers. Participants also discussed how to recognize whether writing workshop is going well in their buildings. This session received an average score of 3.7/4 on our three exit ticket questions, and eighteen principals, instructional coaches, and language arts specialists participated.

Implementation of the *Writing Units of Study*

Teachers began implementation of the *Writing Units of Study* in September with introductory lessons, followed by the first unit, which was on writing narratives in grades first through fifth and on writing both narrative and informational texts in kindergarten.

Instructional coaches and principals have been working with individual grade levels to help design a meaningful scope of instruction for the rest of the year. All grade levels are teaching their second unit, either opinion/argument writing or information writing (and several are moving into their third in early 2017). Teachers are encouraged to and supported in using the routines of the Units, including:

- Starting each unit with an “On Demand” piece of writing, to help the teacher understand what students can already do in this genre
- Using a “Mini-lesson--Work time--Sharing” structure for lessons
- Choosing “mentor texts” to help guide students in quality writing
- Conferring and having small group instruction during work time
- Introducing the writing checklists at the start of instruction, to help bring consistency of language and expectations and engage students in goal-setting and self-reflection to build toward independence
- Increasing the volume of writing
- Organizing students into writing partnerships to support more opportunities to get input, “think aloud” as a writer and build accountable speaking and listening into each writing lesson
- Writing for “real audiences” and celebrating at the end of each unit

The below comments from a recent teacher survey reflect the positive trends found in the survey data:

“The students are engaged and excited to write every day.”

“[Students] are using their writing notebooks and are able to write longer entries and for longer periods of time. They can articulate strategies they're using.”

“Assessments show progress, students love the lessons and writing.”

“Students are enjoying the degree of choice, and they are producing a LOT of writing. I am pleased, and surprised, by much of the progress.”

“My students have been much more creative and engaged this year. They are planning, writing, and editing. I've been impressed with the finished writing pieces.”

Some of the challenges many teachers identified in the survey were related to *time*, as well as giving *feedback and support to students*:

- Needing more time to read and plan lessons
- Needing more instructional time in their weekly schedules to teach writing
- Using writing workshop time more effectively to provide quality feedback during conferences
- Supporting struggling students (more ideas on how to differentiate and support students)

Based on data collected from our teacher survey, professional learning session exit tickets, and in-person conversations, some new practices we will be working on in 2017 include:

- Creating opportunities to look at student work to help guide instruction (across grade levels and vertically)
- Improving conferring and small group instruction (how to take strong teacher notes to provide even more targeted and helpful mini-lessons and feedback)

- Scheduling future professional learning sessions so that they are more accessible to teachers (e.g. on a Wednesday after-school planning time)
- Offering professional learning sessions in grade bands (K-2 and 3-5) for more targeted support
- Posting videos of after-school professional learning sessions for teachers, as well as related session materials

Additional next steps we will be taking for *Writing Units of Study* implementation are:

- Noting how our scope and sequence works and making adjustments for 2017-2018, in conjunction with the ongoing K-5 ELA Written Curriculum work
- Filming our own example videos of mini-lessons and conferences to share with teachers internally, within our district
- Revising our report cards to align better with the *Writing Units of Study*
- Transitioning from consultant-driven writing workshop coaching to using our growing in-house expertise (i.e. our principals, instructional coaches, and teacher leaders)
- Providing support to our instructional coaches as we transition writing workshop coaching to in-house, school-based support full-time
- Encouraging peer observations and using demonstration classrooms as job-embedded professional learning opportunities
- Working with schools and principals to maximize instructional time in their master schedules

Recommended Purchases for the 2017-2018 School Year

Last May, the K-5 ELA Planning Committee shared with all K-5 teachers a proposed adoption timeline for balanced literacy instructional materials:

2016-2017	<i>Writing Units of Study</i> (school-based roll out) Classroom Library Inventory Word Study Materials Review
2017-2018	<i>Writing Units of Study</i> (district-wide) <i>Reading Units of Study</i> (school-based roll out) Word Study Materials
2018-2019	<i>Reading Units of Study</i> (district-wide) Guided Reading/small group materials

Following winter break, we will be forming a committee to review Word Study materials as well as beginning to conduct a district-wide classroom library inventory (which is currently being piloted at Hatch).

Based on teacher survey data, we have some interest from teachers in implementing *Reading Units of Study* to complement the *Writing Units of Study*. Because teacher interest has been mixed, we continue to recommend that school-based decisions be made around the implementation of *Reading Units of Study* next year, with district-wide implementation planned for the 2018-2019 school year.

At this time, we propose that we make the following purchases to continue to strengthen our literacy instruction within a balanced literacy framework for the 2017-2018 school year

- *Reading Units of Study* (gradual roll-out)
- Benchmark Assessment System (BAS) - assessment system used to determine each student's guided reading level - necessary for Reading Workshop (gradual roll-out)
- Classroom Libraries Supplementation - purchase additional books to ensure classroom libraries are diverse and well-stocked for Reading Workshop

2016 data released by the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project (TCRWP) indicate that students in TCRWP schools outperform students in non-TCRWP schools in New York City, and their work has also resulted in:

- Improved ELA performance for the student population at large
- Improved performance across all groups of learners, including ELL/ESL students and Students with Disabilities
- Increased ELA proficiency for each year spent in a TCRWP school
- Higher scores overall at all grade levels (3-8) compared to NYC & NYS

For more details on the data demonstrating the effectiveness of TCRWP's work on balanced literacy and the *Units of Study*, please go to <http://tinyurl.com/tcrwpdata2016>.

We believe that as we continue to strengthen literacy instruction in the district under a balanced literacy approach, our students will see much growth in becoming confident and more proficient writers, readers, and thinkers. Implementing the *Units of Study* will also help teachers and staff to continue to develop lifelong connections with our students, provide them with a vehicle for student voice and agency, and help instill within them a love for writing, reading, and communicating.

As a result, implementing the *Units of Study* and a balanced literacy approach will also help us address the district's vision and goals:

Create a positive learning environment for all District 97 students that is equitable, inclusive, and focused on the whole child.

- **Positive learning environment** is a place where all members of the school community are engaged in hands-on, real-world experiences and feel safe, empowered, supported and valued.
 - Students and staff feel empowered, valued, and respected.
- **Equity** is the practice of beliefs and creation of systems that provide access and opportunities for all students in order to eliminate the predictability of outcomes associated with race, gender and socioeconomic status.
 - Every student is challenged and engaged.
 - All students have access to programs and supports to prepare them for success in high school.
 - We support every student to be a critical thinker, ready to contribute to their community.

- **Inclusive** is the collective responsibility to provide equitable opportunities for access and promote active participation of all stakeholders in an accepting and supporting environment.
 - Each student is known for who they are and their unique needs are met.
 - Students feel safe and a sense of belonging.
- **Whole Child Focused** is the practice of supporting, measuring, and celebrating all aspects of a student's development (social/emotional, academic, physical, artistic expression) through caring and respectful relationships.
 - Caring adult-student relationships
 - Students lead their own learning and become lifelong learners

APPENDIX A

Modeling Conferring with Students

Lisa Vahey has been coaching teachers in three of our elementary schools, which has included modeling conferring with students. Below is a transcript from one of her student conferences with a student who has struggled with writing. The transcript below demonstrates the power of feedback to the student about a writing strategy and relationship-building through conferences with the teacher.

L: Okay, draw the arc. You can use my pen. These are my favorite writing pens. Now, at the top is *the* most important part, it's the tension, it's the climax, it's the moment of action. Just write down the 5 or 6 words that describe what it is.

L: "Everything is going wrong." How is that going to be resolved?

S: So, there was a hill, and there were... (indistinct)

L: Keep going...

S: And at the house their parents were wondering where they were...

L: Yup.

S: And so they.... and then a helicopter saw the sign, and they ran up to them ...and got them.

L: So I'm seeing these three things that are happening. This is the climax. And then something's going to happen at the hill, something's going to happen at the house, something's going to happen at the police station. Have you written these scenes yet?

S: I've written about the hill but I haven't written about those two.

L: OK, so this is where you're going right now. You're solving the problem for your characters. I'm looking at that from over here, and I'm going to give you a push as a writer. Make sure you add some dialogue so that I know how the parents are feeling. Are they angry at their kids? Are they...

S: They're worried.

L: Mmm-hmm. So when you...instead of it saying "Mom said," "Mom said," "Dad said," "Dad said," What's another word besides "said" that shows worried, energy around it?

S: Dad was freaking out.

L: Yep, freaking out, what else?

S: Dad was feeling overwhelmed.

L: Wow, so when you're overwhelmed, how does your voice sound?

S: Like, stressful.

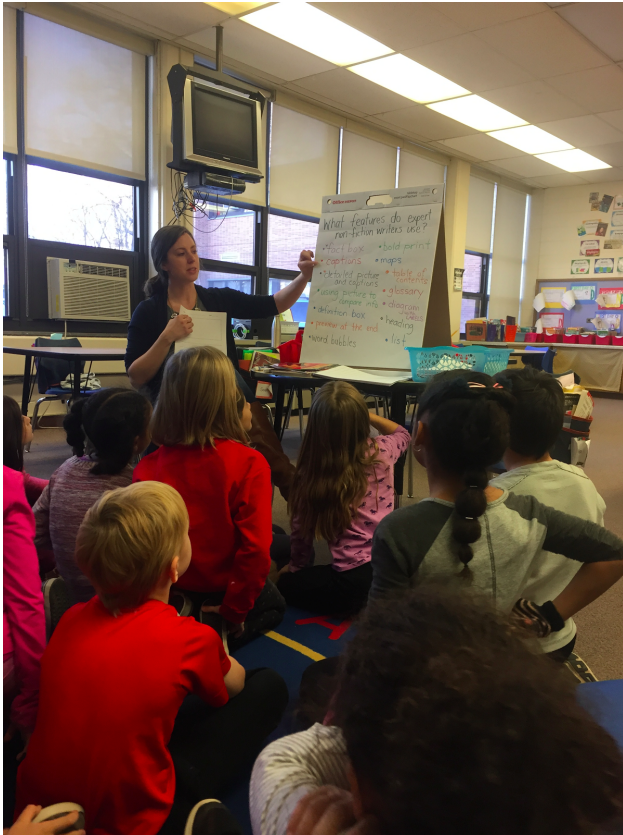
L: In a stressed voice. Or when I'm overwhelmed sometimes my voice is shaky. So, I'm giving you this bank of words that you can use as you work on this today as a writer. OK, are you ready to go?

S: Yeah.

L: Excellent, dig in.

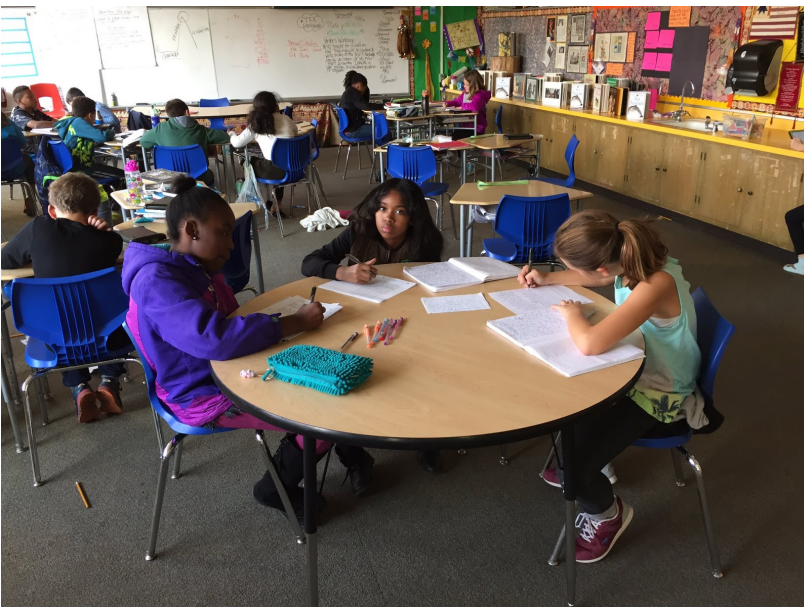
APPENDIX B
Writing Units of Study in Action

Mini-lessons



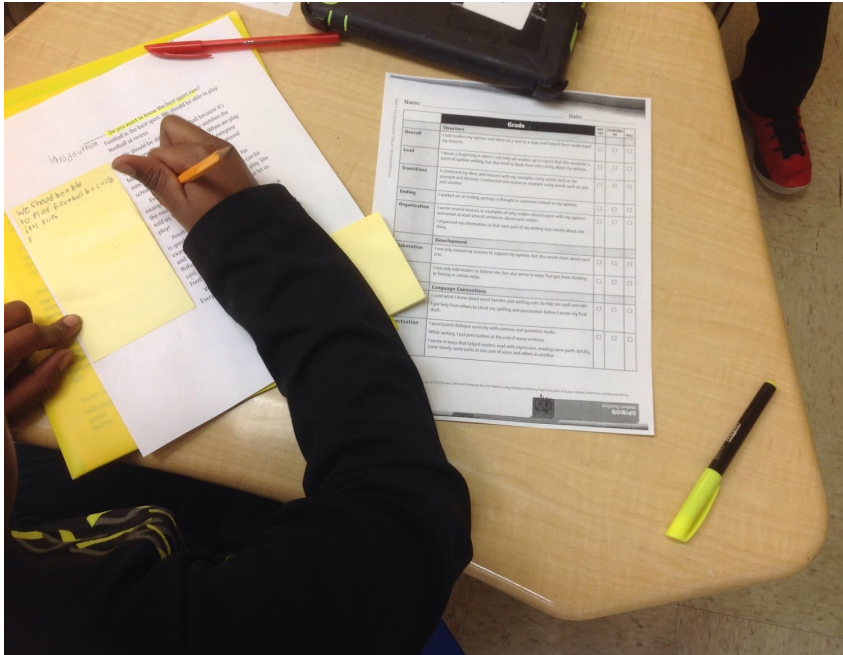
Holmes

Work Time



Beye

Work Time - Using Student Checklists



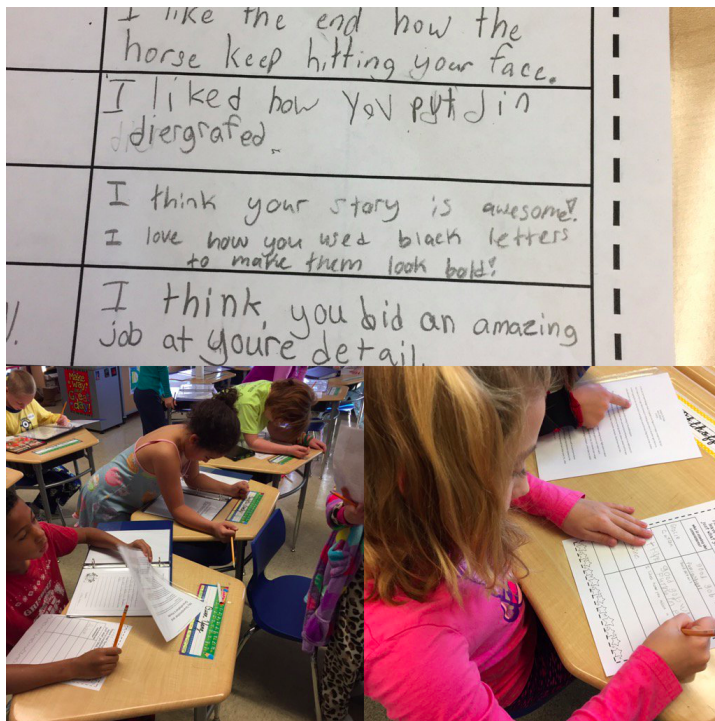
Longfellow

Peer Conferences



Whittier

Celebrations



Mann

"I like that students have choice and authenticity in their writing. 4th grade did a gallery walk through all four classrooms for our celebration. Students really enjoyed reading other stories and giving/ receiving feedback."

- Fourth Grade Teacher

"We had a great time celebrating the end of our first unit by sharing our books with our third grade book buddies! We also made a special bin in our classroom library for our published books. Now the kids can 'check out' each other's books from our classroom library"

- First Grade Teacher

"Students shared their published pieces with their class and also created an "about the author" page for themselves."

- Second Grade Teacher

"We shared our published works with our 5th grade book buddies and the kids loved reading their published writing to the big kids!"

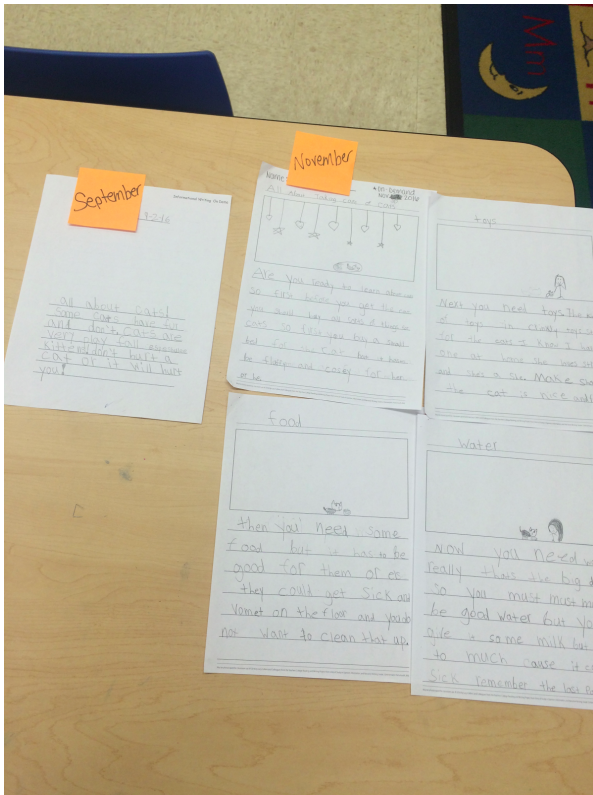
- Kindergarten Teacher

Irving



Lincoln

Volume of Writing



Hatch