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## **Action Research Report**

**Focus Question/Subquestions:** What impact will Marcia Freeman's CraftPlus approach to writing instruction have on the learners' use of elements of good writing?

- 1) What impact will using Marcia Freeman's CraftPlus Writing Approach have on first grade students' writing in the areas of conventions, composing, and organization?
- 2) What impact will Marcia Freeman's CraftPlus approach to writing have on the students' attitudes about themselves as writers?
- 3) How will parents perceive their children as writers after using Marcia Freeman's CraftPlus Writing Approach?

### **Rationale and Line of Inquiry**

**Meet students' needs and help me grow professionally:** Writing continues to be the main means by which students are expected to demonstrate their acquisition of knowledge. Research has shown that an emphasis on writing is one of five common characteristics of schools with high academic performance. Writing effectively is a struggle for many students. I want to place a greater emphasis on writing and improve the quality of my writer's workshop. By adding CraftPlus Writing, students' writing skills should improve with more of them reaching proficiency in the assessed areas of ideas, organization, and conventions.

Marcia Freeman's CraftPlus Writing Program is built on a strong theoretical and research base. It also exceeds the expected state writing standards. While I have a good background in writing workshop, and I conference with students individually, at times I do not feel I am doing as effective a job as I need to do. I hope to increase my knowledge of teaching writing using Marcia Freeman's curriculum which focuses on teaching students explicit Target Skills and techniques that all writers use. I am also looking for an effective means of communicating my students' writing strengths and weaknesses both to my students and their parents. I want my students to see themselves as writers because they feel successful. It will be clear when they have successfully met a Target Skill. I want them to be motivated to write by increasing opportunities for success by fostering a love of writing. By answering my research questions, I hope to validate Marcia Freeman's CraftPlus Writing Program and to grow professionally by improving my knowledgebase in the area of writing.

The learning that I will complete as a result of my research experience emphasizes my belief that strong literacy skills are not only essential for school participation but they are life skills my students will need and use as they become contributing adults in society. This belief reflects the goals of the Green Bay School District's as well as the literacy goals of Wilder School.

### Review of Literature:

#### ***Teaching the Youngest Writers: A Practical Guide* by Marcia S. Freeman (2003)**

The examples in this book show how to take students from emergent to secure writers. It's a complete guide to conducting a daily writing workshop in the primary grades. This professional resource includes models for managing the writing process. *Teaching the Youngest Writers* explains the expository, descriptive, and personal-narrative writing techniques students need to become fluent writers. It also includes stages of emergent writing, how to set up your room, how to schedule and manage the daily writing workshop, how to conduct an Author's Chair, and how to model writing and efficient peer conferences.

***CraftPlus First Grade Curriculum Guide* by Marcia Freeman (2008)** This spiraling and differentiated writing curriculum organizes writing skills by grade. The focus is on explicitly teaching descriptive and genre-specific Target Skills in a way that uses student, teacher, and literature models. This guide includes the writing process, writing craft, and grammar skills with an emphasis on critical informational genres. CraftPlus helps create independent writers who love to write and teachers who understand how to teach writing in the 30- to 45-minute writing workshop. The *Curriculum Guide* with Target Skills is arranged in four differentiated levels; planning, instruction, and assessment tools. Two professional resources are included.

***CraftPlus Daily Writing Lessons for First Grade* by Marcia Freeman (2008)** This resource contains 180 writing mini-lessons which track the CraftPlus curriculum, supply unit assessments, and list Target Skills expectations. A grade-level CD contains assessment forms, graphic organizers, handouts, student samples, and a grammar guide. It contains a detailed Target Skills list, scope and sequence, literature models and materials list, and assessment rubrics. The lessons provide teachers with the immediate support they need now and for the entire year.

***Building a Writing Community: A Practical Guide* by Marcia Freeman (2003)** This resource was written for teachers of developing writers. Teachers appreciate this easy-to-use yet comprehensive approach to teaching young writer's style and genre characteristics, composing skills, conventions, and the writing process itself. The techniques satisfy young writers' need for structure and content while offering them freedom to develop their style, repertoire, and voice. It contains more than 350 classroom-tested models, lessons, procedures and activities, and thirty-seven reproducibles. It will help create a community of writers who love to write and speak the language of writers.

***Models for Teaching Writing-Craft Target Skills*** by Marcia S. Freeman with Luana K. Mitten and Rachel M. Chappell (2005) Writing is best taught through models. Showing students how other authors apply the writing-craft skills that you teach is a vital part of writing instruction. This resource matches twenty-four fundamental writing-craft Target Skills to a wide selection of fiction and non-fiction books. This will help provide a solid starting set of strong models for writing-craft instruction. Most of the models are picture books, which are particularly engaging for young readers. *Models for Teaching Writing-Craft Target Skills* helps teachers utilize the natural connection between writing and content-area reading. This resource will help increase the power of writing-workshop modeled lessons.

***Apprenticeship in Literacy Transitions Across Reading and Writing*** by Linda Dorn, Cathy French, Tammy Jones (1998) This teacher resource emphasizes the role of the teacher in providing demonstration, engaging children, monitoring their understanding, providing timely support and, withdrawing support as the child gains independence. As children become more competent readers and writers, the instructional interactions are adjusted to accommodate their higher-level learning. I feel that all of the concepts in this book can be applied to Marcia Freeman's CraftPlus Writing program.

***Guiding K-3 Writers to Independence*** by Patricia L. Scharer & Gay Su Pinnell (2008) This teacher resource provides practical suggestions for teaching writing, and is built on sound theory and research. In the first few chapters the focus is on what makes a quality writing program and how to build a community of writers. The final chapters emphasize the importance of connecting reading and writing and strategies for meeting the needs of individual learners. This is an excellent resource to support the CraftPlus Target Writing Program.

### **Research Base of Marcia Freeman's CraftPlus® School-Wide Writing Program**

According to the CraftPlus website, Marcia Freeman's CraftPlus® School-Wide Writing Program (2004) is built on a strong theoretical and research base; it states:

In the late 1990s, an extensive four-year study of over 225 schools (1) found that an emphasis on writing is one of five common characteristics of schools with high academic performance irrespective of demographics. They found a "striking association" between writing and performance in other academic disciplines. The researchers summarized, "it is difficult to escape the conclusion that an emphasis on writing improvement has a significant impact on student test scores in other disciplines, including science." Emphasis on writing as used in this research includes an emphasis on "informational writing," using written responses in testing across the curriculum, and a clearly established high standard of "good writing," the very characteristics at the core of the Freeman program.

Every element and methodology of the Freeman program is consistent with universally recognized principles of developmental psychology, language and literacy acquisition, and the writing process. Among the most prominent sources of these principles are the works of Jean Piaget, Noam Chomsky, Brian Cambourne, Donald Graves, Douglas Fisher, and research by the NCTE.

## **Jean Piaget**

Piaget's work is covered in college educational-psychology courses. One of his important principles pertains to the stages of brain maturation, notably the difference between the concrete operational thinker of age 5 to 10, and the abstract thinker of age 10 and higher. (Ages are approximate and of course vary from child to child.)

Some of the important ways in which the Freeman program applies these principles:

- Using physical sorting of listed details about a topic on the first occasions of organizing informational text.
- Introducing abstract graphic planners only when students have developed abstract thinking abilities.
- Refraining from asking kindergarteners and first graders to write stories, an age when they cannot yet sequence events in time.

## **Noam Chomsky**

Chomsky, a leading linguistics researcher, showed us that children acquire syntactical knowledge of their native language as early as their sixth month. (2) The Freeman program particularly utilizes this in its innovative *Editing-by-Ear* method of teaching punctuation to young writers.

## **Brian Cambourne**

Cambourne, a leading authority on language and literacy acquisition, teaches us that certain conditions are necessary before such learning can occur, and before children are able to use language in early literacy. (3) The Freeman program applies these findings in how it teaches writing skills, creating these crucial learning conditions throughout the lesson and afterward.

## **Donald Graves**

Graves defined the writing process for us -- the sequence of steps that all effective writers go through (4). He introduced the groundbreaking notion that young writers need to follow that process for their classroom writing. He then introduced to schools across the nation the concept of a daily writing workshop. The writing process is an integral part of the Freeman program. The program uses the process, in parts and as a whole, as the students apply, practice, and demonstrate the targeted writing craft skills they have been taught.

## **Douglas Fisher**

In the September 2007 issue of *The Reading Teacher*, Dr. Douglas Fisher discussed developing an integrated framework for oral, written, and reading literacy in his article, "Aspects of Building a Literacy Framework."

**NCTE** - A *National Council of Teachers of English Research Report* examined the result of using the writing process approach to teaching writing. It concluded that

- Written language is closely related to oral language. Teaching should emphasize and exploit the close connection between the two.

- There is some evidence that sentence combining practice, without instruction in formal grammar, is an aid to syntactic fluency.
  - The study of grammar is an ineffective way to teach writing.
  - Teachers should give greater emphasis to the guiding of a careful development of a limited number of papers, with attention given to direct methods of instruction during the writing process, rather than on the hurried production of a great number of papers.
  - Frequency of writing in and of itself is not associated with improved writing.
  - Revision is critical to improving writing.
  - Peer evaluation and editing are effective in improving writing skills.
- Everything in the Freeman program, from its teaching of specific writing-craft skills, to how it emphasizes practice writing and taking only about 20% of written pieces through the entire process, to its enhanced peer conferences, to its approach to editing, is consistent with the findings of this report.

Finally, in a manner of speaking, classrooms are the ultimate research laboratories. Every day teachers observe student behaviors and reactions, and the efficacies of various instructional approaches. So it is most telling that the techniques and methodologies used in the Freeman program have all been field-tested in a large number and wide variety of classrooms, with universally positive academic outcomes and teacher responses that attest to the program's effectiveness, practicality, and classroom friendliness.

After extensive research at the U.W. Green Bay library I was unable to find research that was conducted on this particular writing program so I contacted the publisher via e-mail. This is her response;

Dear Amy,

I appreciate your writing me, and I am happy to see that someone is working on getting research about this wonderful program. I think it will be innovative research; as far as I know, there is no formal research on the impact of the program in relation to others, although we have a lot of anecdotal information. We currently have about four pilot sites around the U. S., and some who have done some data collection on the impact of the program for state testing scores, and also on the attitudes of students and parents after using this program. Please let me know if this is helpful to you. Also, are you using the program in Green Bay successfully? We are always interested in your success and helping make it so! As you get the details of your study up and running, keep me posted. Julie Graddy, publisher

Thanks so much!! I hope you will be sharing this with me at some point??

**Data Collected:** The target population for this action research study was based on 24 first grade students; 13 boys and 11 girls, currently in my classroom. Three students

qualified for special education services and therefore did not end the study with me and did not complete the post assessments.

My data collection is made up of quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data included two pre and post study assessments; CraftPlus Primary Writing Stage Assessment and the Green Bay Public Schools writing prompt assessment.

**Pre and post study assessments given to first grade students:**

- **Primary Writing Stage Assessment from CraftPlus Writing (Appendix 1)**

Determine writing stage; there are seven stages of development that emergent and early writers can be as described in terms of their writing behavior. (Attachment 1a)

*Stage One:* Picture Writer

*Stage Two:* Verbal Informer

*Stage Three:* Letter copier

*Stage Four:* Labeler

*Stage Five:* Inventory Taker/Sound Maker

*Stage six:* Sentence Maker

*Stage seven:* Information Communicator/Story Maker

The assessment was given in fall and then in spring. The format for the end sample was the same. The results were evaluated both by myself and by our literacy coach. The fall and spring scores were then compared to look at student growth. (See Appendix 1b)

- **Green Bay Public Schools Fall Writing Prompt Assessment (Appendix 2)**

This assessment was given to determine; emerging, developing, proficient, or advanced in the writing elements of; conventions, composing, and organization. The assessment was given in fall and then again in spring. The format for the end sample was the same. These were then evaluated by both me and our literacy coach. These assessments were evaluated by using a district rubric written by a district committee. (See Appendix 2a) The fall and spring scores were then compared to look at student proficiency level. (See Appendix 2b, 2c, 2d, 2e, 2f)

The qualitative data includes **survey** results given to both **students** and **parents** in fall and then again in spring to determine views and perceptions of writing before and after CraftPlus Writing implementation.

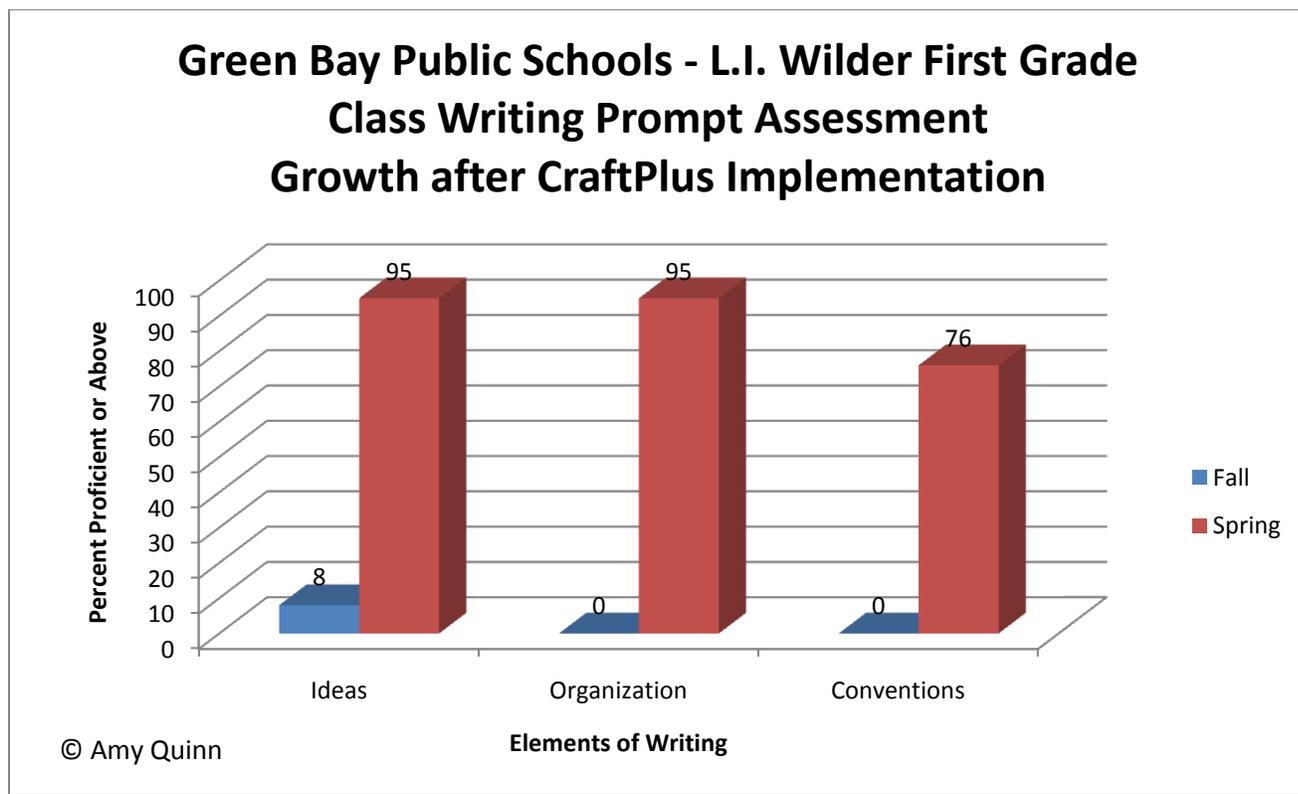
- **Student survey** (See Appendix 3) - The students completed a teacher designed writing survey in the fall and then again in spring to measure attitudes about writing. The survey was taken as a class and read aloud. The surveys were analyzed to determine what change, if any, occurred regarding the students as writers. (See Appendix 3a, 3b, 3c, 3d)



were found to have special education needs and were placed in a Learning Disabilities classroom some time during the study. These three students did not complete the study with me. Therefore, **100%** of the students starting and ending the study with me reached the desired writing stage! Though students began at different stages, they all ended at least a Stage 7. In fact many of them exceeded my first grade writing expectations. (See student samples in Appendix 1c, 1d, 1e) I am very excited at this result! A disadvantage of this tool is that it is limiting because it tops out at stage 7. It appears that all 21 of my students ended at the same writing stage when in reality they did not. Some are at level 7 but many are beyond.

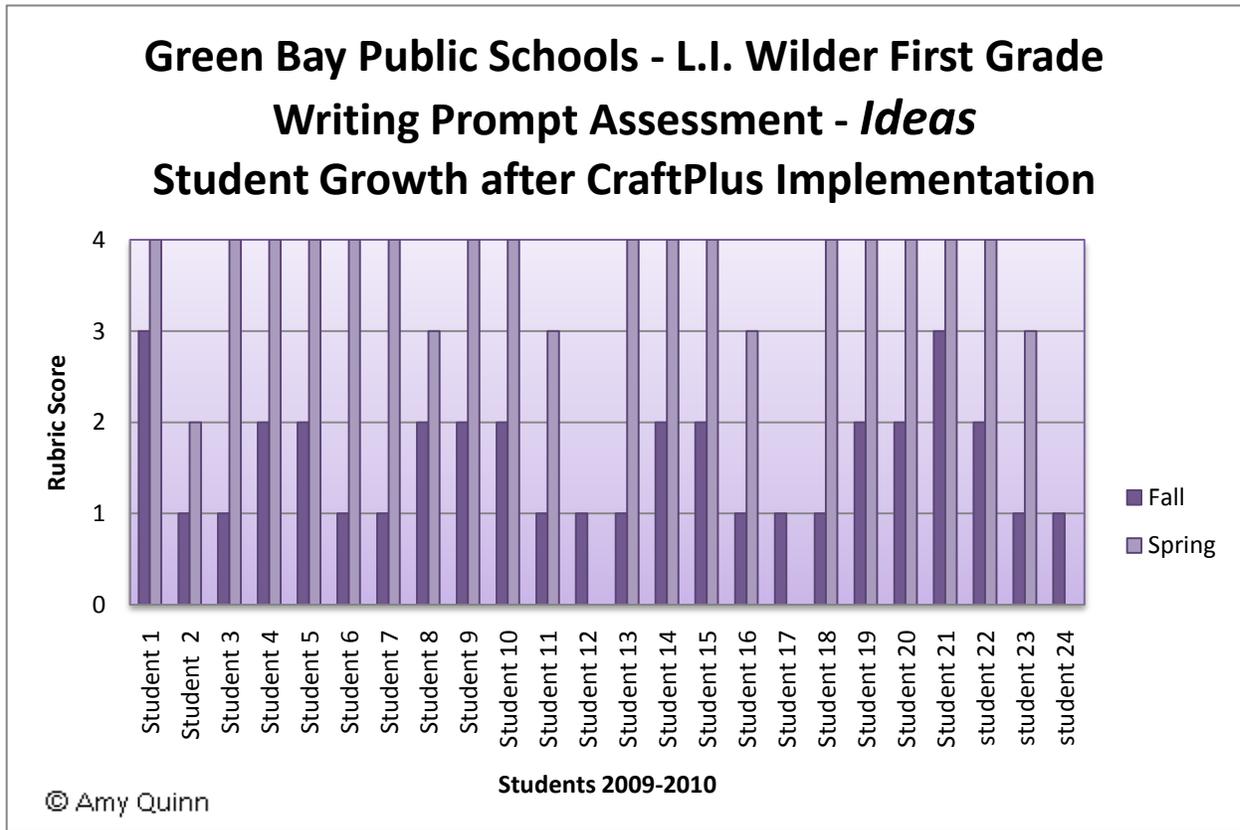
My students were also given **Green Bay Public Schools Fall Writing Prompt**. Using a 4 point rubric, two scorers determined pre and post study levels in three areas; ideas, organization, and conventions. (See Attachment 2a)

## Graph 2



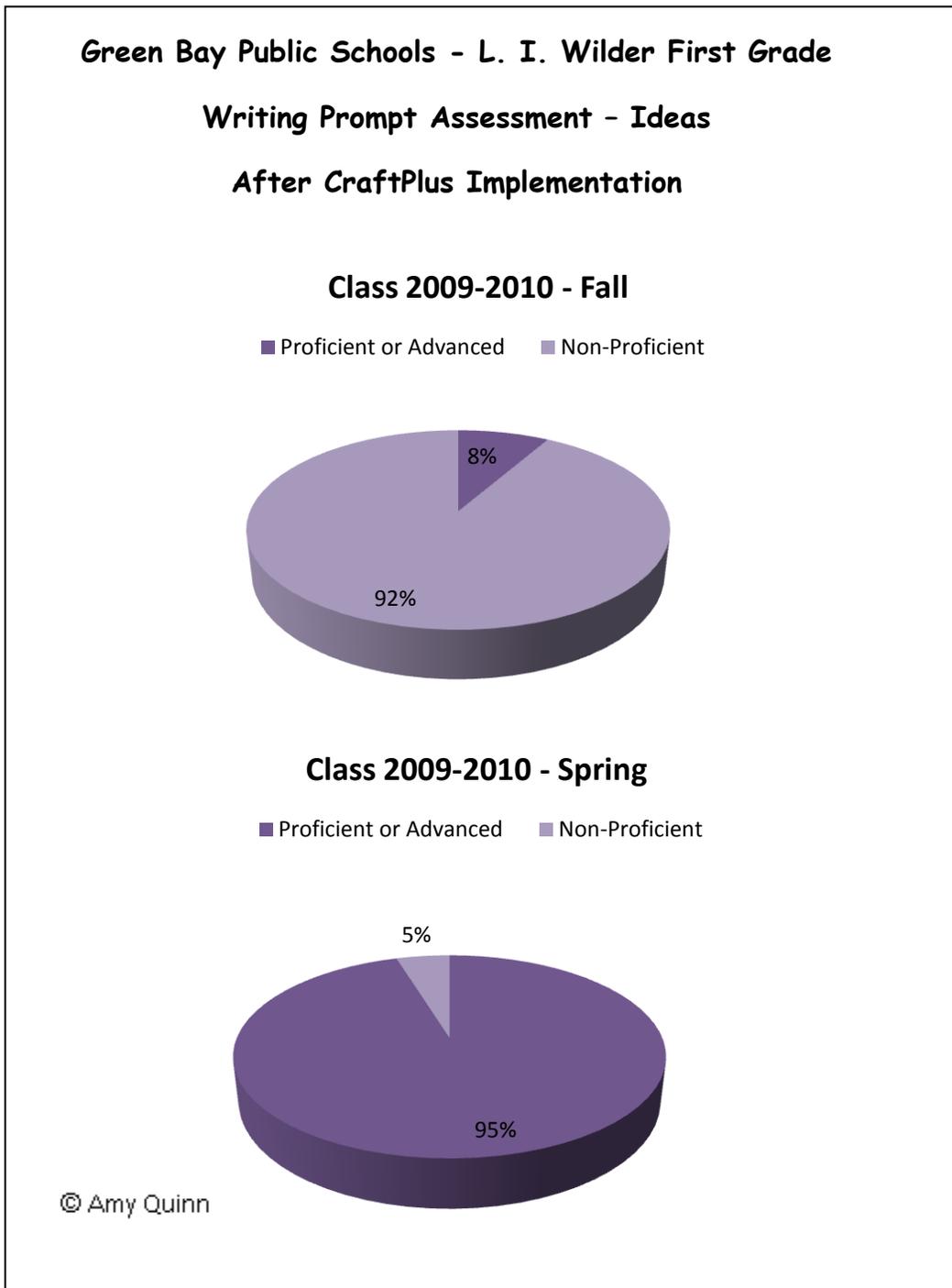
The results of the comparison of fall to spring assessment scores strongly support the use of Marcia Freeman’s CraftPlus Writing Curriculum when looking at the elements of ideas, organization, and conventions. (See Appendix 2b) The goal is to have all students achieve proficiency or above on the assessment. The data shows that 95% of the students were proficient or above in the writing element of ideas, 90% in the area of organization, and 76% in the area of conventions.

**Graph 3 -Writing Ideas** - the message, theme or story line, backed by important, carefully chosen details and supportive information.



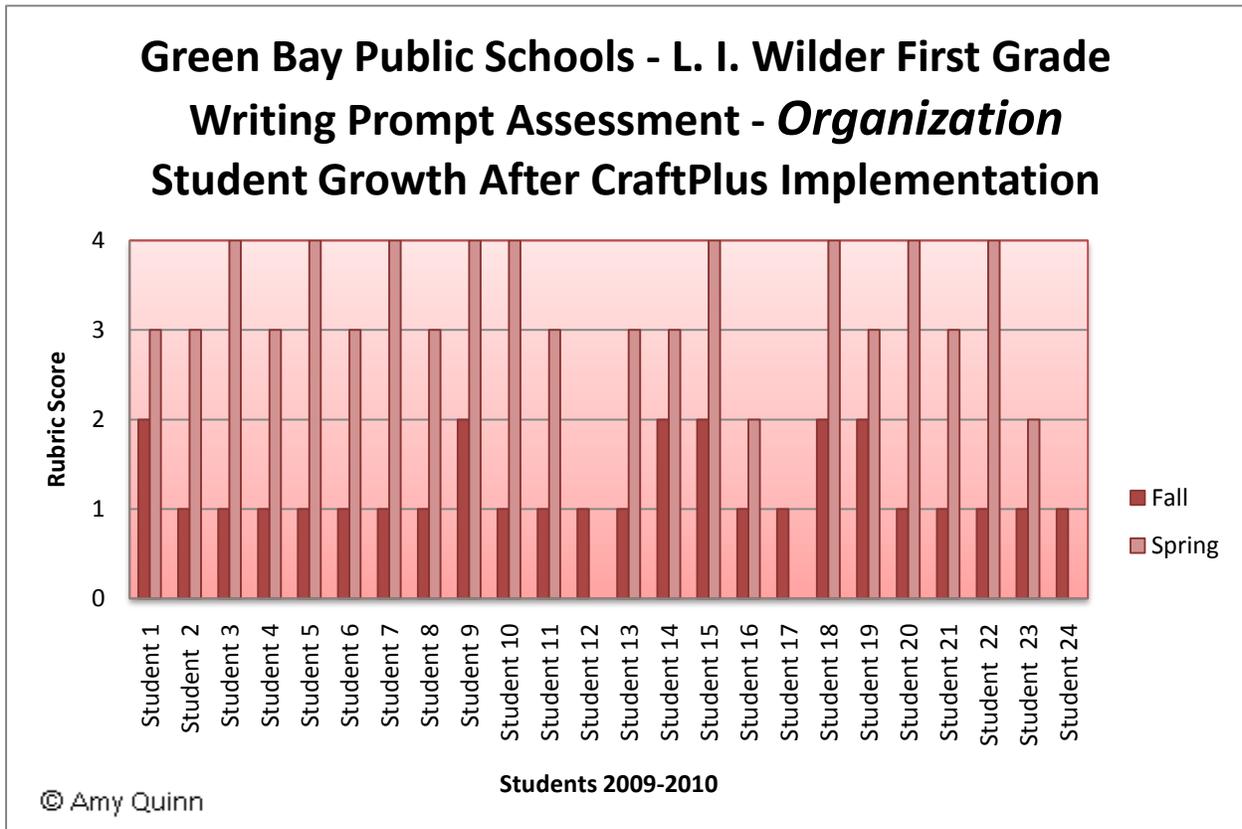
This data is very exciting to me! When comparing the students writing samples in the area of writing ideas, you can see that every student that finished the study (3 students were placed in special education classes) with me made at least some growth. **100%** of my students showed growth in this area! This is impressive! No student in the fall had received a rubric score of four in this area. Sixteen students ended the study with an advanced rubric score. In my many years of teaching, I often struggled with this area; Students who would say “I don’t know what to write about.” This was the first year, I can honestly say, It was not a problem!

## Graph 3A



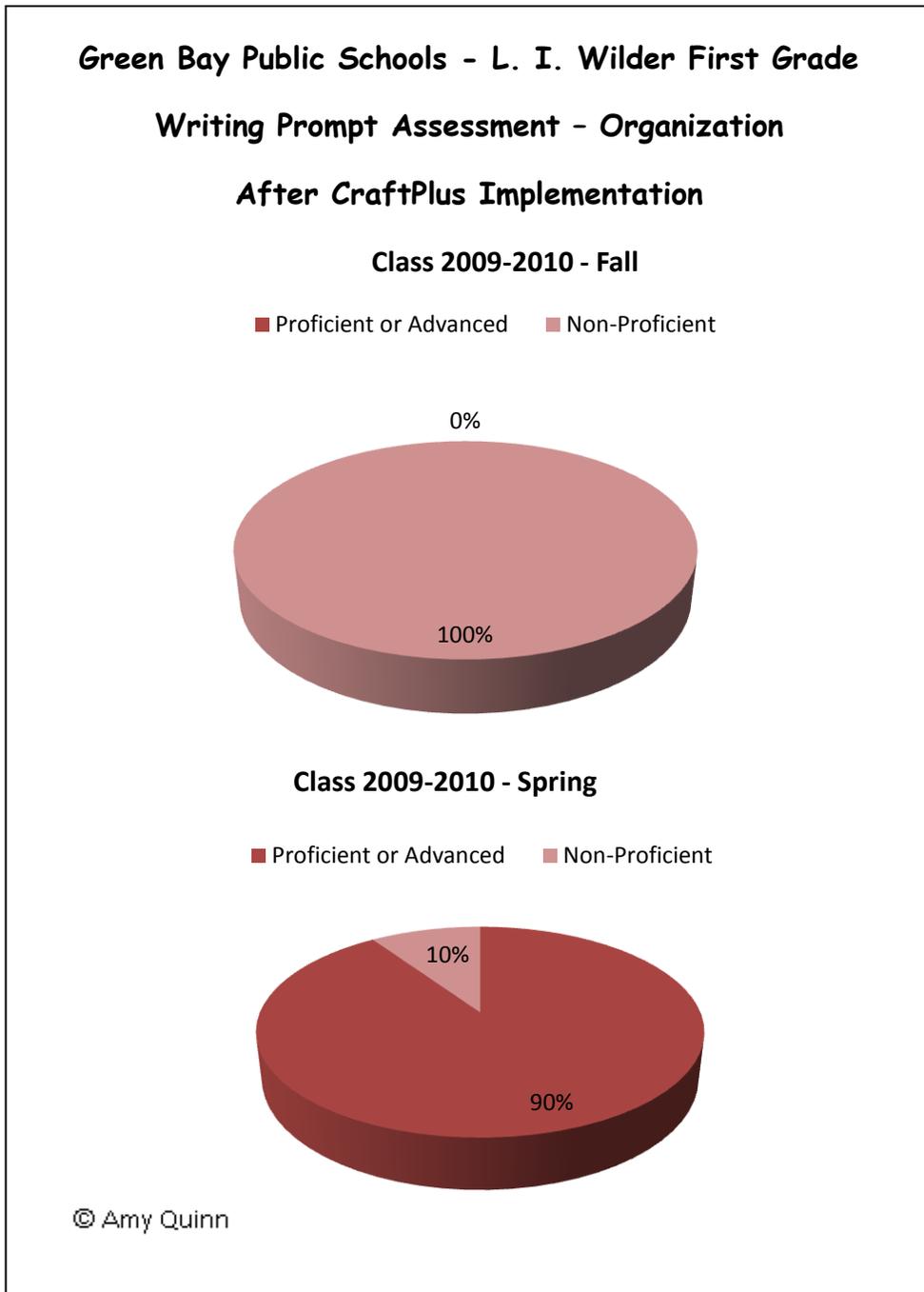
These pie graphs show that in the fall 8% of the class scored in the proficient or advanced areas. In the spring, **95%** scored proficient or advanced! That's an 86% growth. The *one* student that did not show proficiency is an ESL student being referred for autism.

**Graph 4 - Writing Organization** – how the piece of writing is structured and organized.



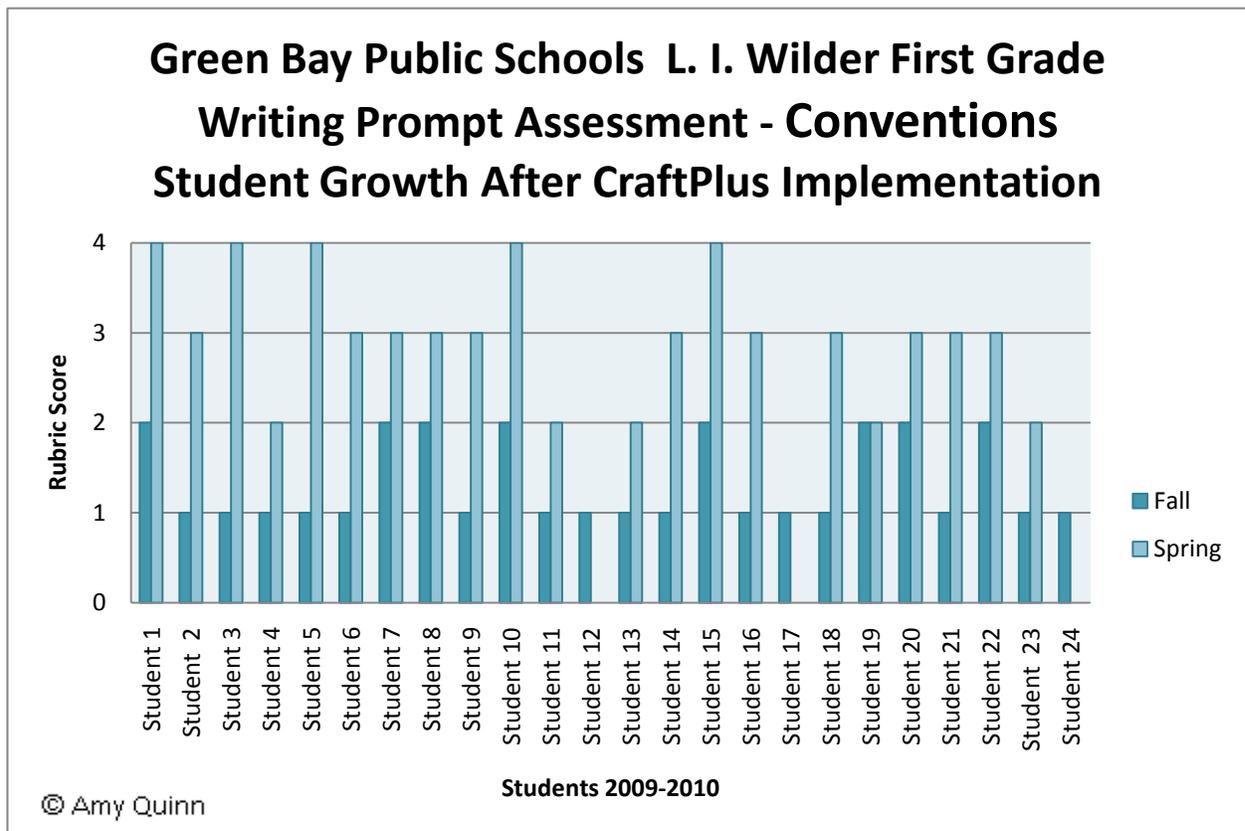
The comparison of the fall and spring writing samples in the area of organization shows **100%** of the students that finished the study (3 students were placed in special education classes) with me showed at least some growth. No students began in fall in the proficient or advanced areas. In spring, 19 students were at least proficient. This area appeared to be the weakest area to begin with and the area that showed the most growth. This is phenomenal!

**Graph 4A**



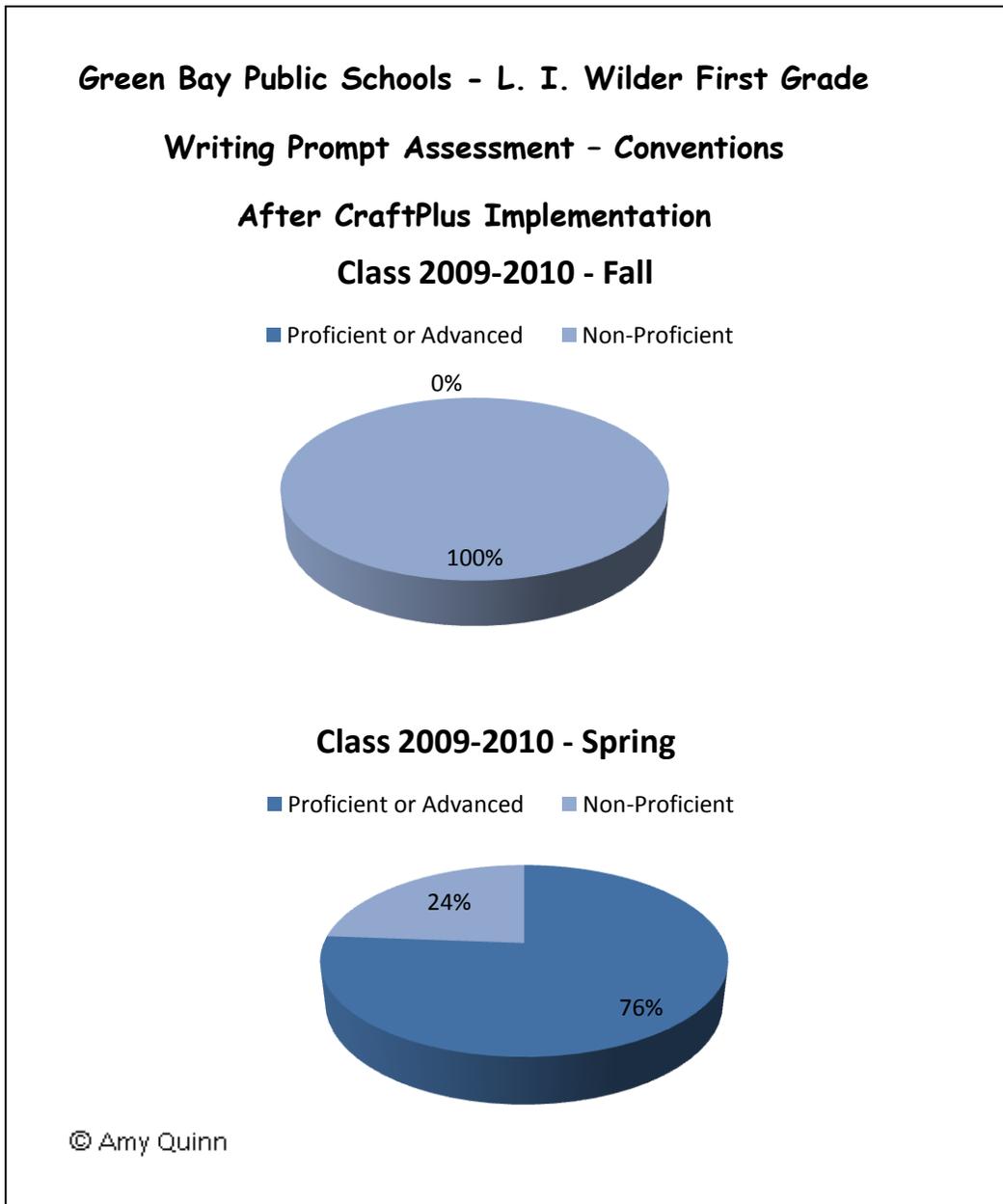
This pie graph shows that in fall, there were no students that scored proficient or advanced when looking at their writing samples for organization. In comparison, in spring **90%** scored proficient or advanced!

**Graph 5 – Writing Conventions** –the mechanics of spelling, grammar, and usage, capitalization, paragraph indentation and punctuation.



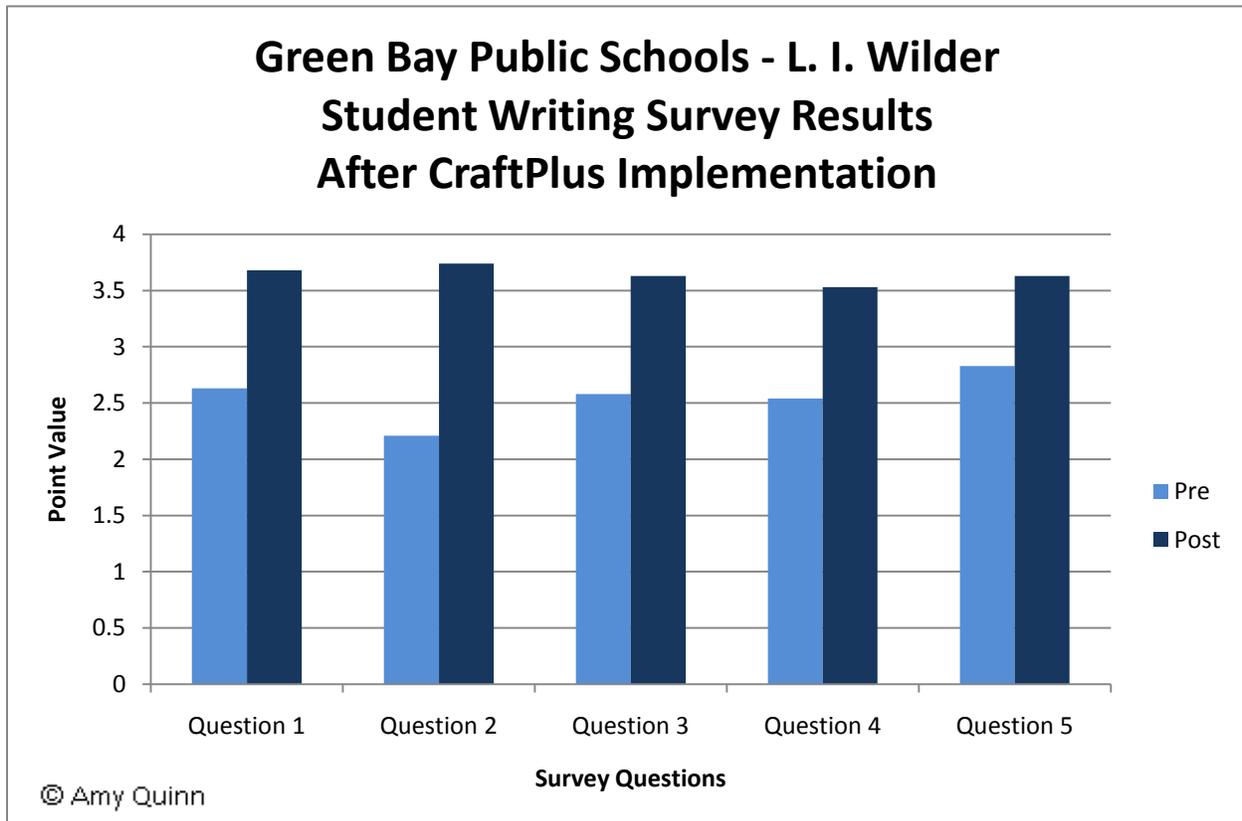
When comparing the students writing samples in the area of writing conventions, you can see that *20/21 students* that finished the study (3 students were placed in special education classes) with me made at least some growth. 95% of my students showed growth in this area. Only one student remained the same. Again, no students were proficient or advanced in fall but 16 were proficient or advanced in spring. I am surprised that this area had the least amount of growth however, it supports the school-wide complaint that our Wilder students in general need to improve in the area of conventions.

**Graph 5A**



This pie graph shows that in the fall 0% of my class were proficient or advanced in the area of conventions. In comparison, in the spring 76% were proficient or advanced!

## Graph 6:



This graph shows the results of a Student Writing Survey (See Appendix 3 and 3A) taken by the first grade students. 24 students took this survey in the fall however; I was only able to get 19 back in the spring. Three students were no longer with me, 1 student was on an extended vacation, and one student was hospitalized. I was curious to see if using the CraftPlus Writing Curriculum would affect student attitudes regarding writing. I was pleasantly pleased to see it did positively affect their attitudes about themselves as writers. I was happy to see improvement in all five areas.

*Question 1: I like to write.*

I am happy to see that the results show that there was a significant increase in the number of students who like to write. All 19 students felt they agreed with this statement a whole lot or a lot. Writing became a fun time of the day.

*Question 2: I am a good writer.*

It is rewarding to see the increase in this area. I want all my students to see themselves as good writers! Again, all 19 students felt they agreed with this statement a whole lot or a lot. I feel this may be contributed to the fact that my students saw many successes in their writing when working on target skills.

*Question 3: I wish I had more time to write at school.*

The increase in this area did not surprise me. Writing was a time of day that we all enjoyed and did not want to stop.

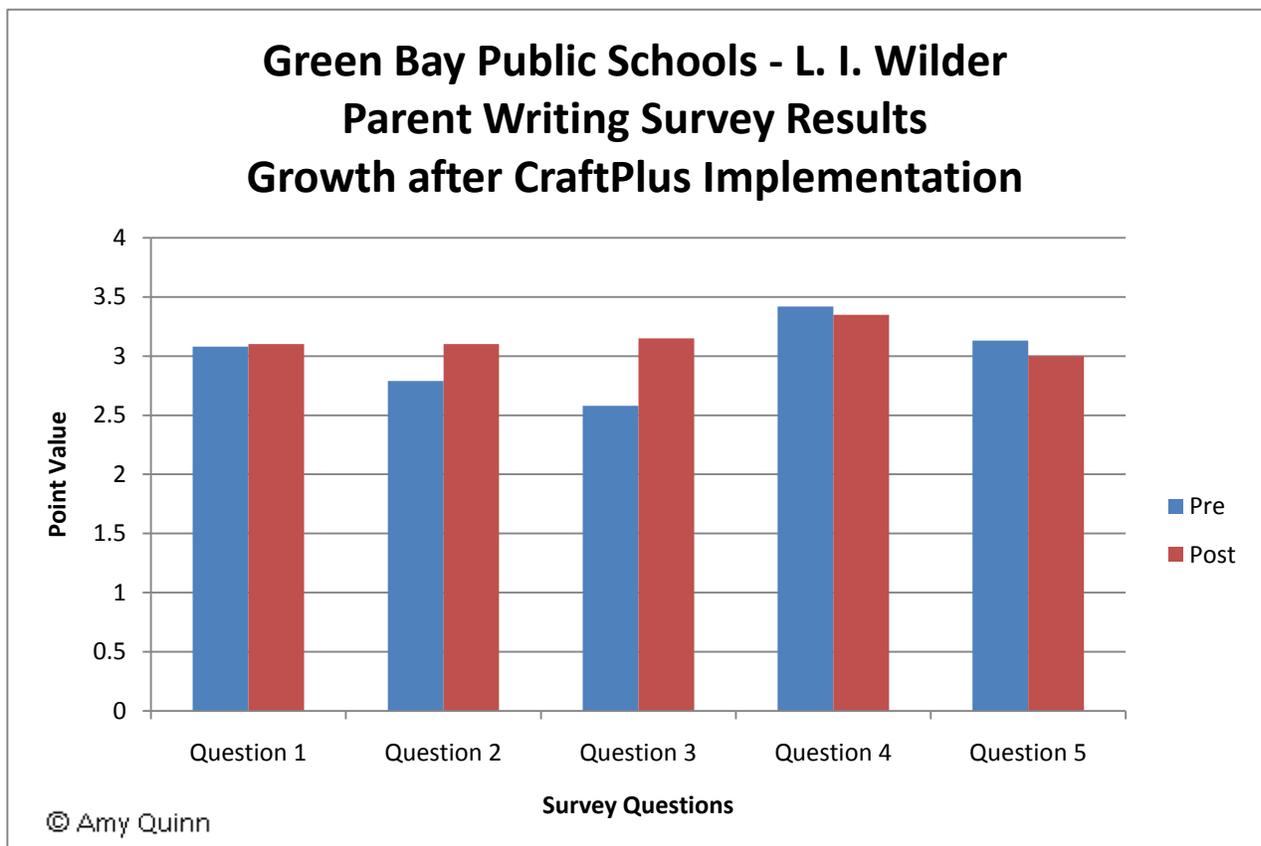
*Question 4: I am good at coming up with ideas to write about.*

This was an area that I saw an increase in almost immediately after starting the program. It was also an area that I saw a lot of student growth in the writing prompt assessment. I am thrilled to have found an approach that can impact student writing in this area.

*Question 5: I like to share my writing.*

I don't think I ever had a shortage of volunteers to share their writing. It was the most rewarding time for me because I could see the pride they had in their work.

### **Graph 7:**



This graph shows the results of a Parent Writing Survey (See Appendix 4 and 4A) completed by the first grade parents. I am very pleased to have gotten all 24 parent surveys returned to me in the fall. In the spring, however, I was only able to get 20 surveys back.

*Question 1: How much do you think your child enjoys writing?*

I was disappointed to see little change in this area. Five of the parents felt they didn't think their child enjoys writing. That bothers me a little bit.

*Question 2: I see my child as a good writer.*

The results show only a small increase in this area. Four parents felt their child was not a good writer. That is disheartening.

*Question 3: How easy is writing for your child?*

The results show an increase in this area. Five parents felt writing was difficult for their child.

*Question 4: How much does your child enjoy sharing his/her writing with you?*

I was shocked to see a decrease in this area since 84% of the students said they liked to share their writing. Maybe, they like to share at school more than at home.

*Question 5: My child sees me writing at home.*

I was surprised to also see a decrease in this area. I thought that by just asking the question, parents would be mindful of writing more in front of their student.

The results of this survey could be attributed to a number of factors. One factor may be that because I was conducting research, I kept much of the student work until the end of the year. Parents didn't see many of the work samples until after they filled out the spring survey. Another factor may have been that the survey did not ask that the same parent fill out both the fall and spring surveys. Therefore, I would not know if two different parents completed the survey. Furthermore, I wondered if their own feelings about writing influenced their responses.

### **Conclusions:**

The findings of this research project supports the theory that using Marcia Freeman's CraftPlus Writing as a part of writing instruction improves student writing particularly in the areas of ideas, organization, and conventions that were assessed using a fall and spring writing prompt. Data from assessments showed significant gains in each of these areas.

There was also a positive result when looking at the effects of Marcia Freeman's CraftPlus Writing instruction on the attitudes of the students towards writing and themselves as writers. Students felt they were ok writers in the fall but by spring they felt pretty good about themselves as writers. This can be attributed to the fact that they truly grew as writers and this was clearly evident each time they met a Target Skill.

The use of Marcia Freeman's CraftPlus Writing had little effect on the parents' perception of their child as a writer. It was disappointing to see that their attitudes about their child were not impacted by the use of this program. There were unforeseen variables that may have affected this result.

Conducting research can be demanding and stressful at times, but the results support my thoughts on Marcia Freeman's CraftPlus Writing curriculum. It is the missing piece to my writer's workshop! My students were much more successful at writing this year than they have been in my past many years of teaching. I will definitely continue to use this program. I loved using it and looked forward to teaching writing. I could easily see student growth in all my students. Writing report cards, conducting student conferences as well as parent-teacher conferences were much more productive and positive because I could refer to explicit Target Skills. It is a great tool to help teachers improve student learning in the area of writing.

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### **Reflected commentary:**

I prepared to begin my action research by reading books, preparing lessons, gathering materials, and deciding on management procedures during the summer of 2009. When the school year began I was ready and very excited to begin using Marcia Freeman's CraftPlus Writing. I loved all the components it had. For once, I was looking forward to teaching writing and felt I had everything I needed. Then the school year began and things did not go as planned. There were so many factors at the beginning of the school year that prevented me from beginning this new writing program. I had to establish routine and procedures and determine when it would best fit into my schedule. Finding a 45 to 60 minute block of time every day was not easy. Once this was all established things went great. I immediately saw the energy in the room when I said we were having writer's workshop. As my students found success with the target skills, I began to feel a newfound confidence that what I was doing was better than anything else I had tried. This motivated me and thus motivated my students. We beamed with pride when a parent or teacher would comment about our writing samples up in the hall. Sharing writing was one of our favorite times of the day. I will make a point to not skip this step as in the past when time was a factor. In the over 20 years I have been teaching, I have never felt so productive during my writing time! The vocabulary terms they were using was amazing! It was so easy to follow the daily lesson plans. I learned so much about teaching writing effectively. The hardest thing was trying to make writing time a priority by not eliminating it when schedules inevitably were changed.

The impact that using Marcia Freeman's CraftPlus Writing appeared to have on my students as writers was exciting to see. The next step would be to continue to use and get familiar with this program. I will have an added challenge next year because my schedule will be dictated by the bilingual schedule of three of my students. Literacy time will have to be shortened. I will need to focus more attention on the conventions area of writing because that was the area we were least proficient. I will be anxious to see if the second grade teachers notice a difference in my students' writing compared to the other two first grade classes. I would like to write a grant to see if funds could be available in order to get more staff development on this program for my first grade team. Even better, I would love Wilder School to adapt this program school-wide. I would like to repeat this research to see if the results are the same with another class and to see the growth after using it for an entire year versus half a year. I would also like to keep the LD students with me for writing, rather than having them leave to receive instruction from a Special Ed. teacher. I think they could be successful if I am using CraftPlus Writing. It is easy to communicate to students and parents when they meet or do not meet a target skill.