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The Development of the WISE (Writing to Inspire Successful Education) Writing Mentoring Program: A University-School Collaboration

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The Development of the WISE (Writing to Inspire Successful Education) Writing Mentoring Program: A University-School Collaboration

Teacher feedback and goal orienting for writing are critically important in improving writing for middle-school students (Flower & Hayes, 1981). The current theory on writing teaching generally details two main approaches to teaching writing: the product approach and the process genre approach. The product approach is known as the traditional approach to writing teaching, in which the teacher asks students to emulate a model writing sample. The process approach is more collaborative, involving multiple drafts and making students more aware of the purpose of their writing, their audience, and the process of writing (Tudor, 2017). Both these practices are time and labor intensive. If there are only a few students in the classroom who are struggling to reach proficiency, it may be possible for committed teachers to help them make gains. However, if most of the class needs help reaching proficiency, then a single classroom teacher likely cannot provide enough assistance for all students to rise to the level of proficiency.

The probability that most of the students in the class will need extensive help to achieve writing proficiency increases as a function of demographic risk factors. Classrooms that have large percentages of low-income, Latinx, African American, or ELL (English Language Learners) students (or all three) tend to need a lot of help. Unfortunately, demographically challenged schools usually have the least resources. Consequently, students in high-risk demographic groups often stagnate in their writing development, which can have negative long-term educational and career impacts. The WISE program model attempts to address these limitations of the current middle level writing education in economically disadvantaged middle schools.

Description of the WISE Program

The Writing to Inspire Successful Education (WISE) program provides writing education support to economically disadvantaged middle school students. This innovative writing mentorship program pairs college writing mentors with individual students to provide feedback, skill development, and encouragement in writing with the goal of reaching writing proficiency. Throughout the year, students submitted essays to their mentor using Google Docs. Mentors then reviewed students' work and created step-by-step personalized videos showing exactly how and where students should revise their writing. Feedback included encouraging comments, corrections of lower-level skills (e.g., grammar), and advice on higher-level skills (e.g., organization and themes). Some students received in-person tutoring. This program model was inspired by an existing writing mentoring program in a public charter school district located in New Orleans, Louisiana. This study details the success of the implementation of this program model in a public charter school district located in Houston, Texas. Additionally, the results of this study suggest the effectiveness of this program model in improving the quality of middle level education in schools with limited resources that serve low-income communities.

Two things that set WISE apart from many other writing interventions are the use of technology to facilitate the writing mentoring and the high level of individual attention and focus on creating positive attitudes about literacy. Given the students' previous experiences with poor test scores that could be demoralizing and frustrating, mentors anticipated that students might be easily frustrated by negative feedback. Consequently, mentors were trained to take a strengths-based approach, provide more positive feedback than negative feedback, and sandwich suggestions for correcting problems between compliments on positive aspects of their essays.

The WISE Program Model Considerations

The goal of the WISE program has always been threefold: to promote proficiency and confidence in writing, to help students gain a general sense of academic self-efficacy, and to expose students to college student role models. To accomplish this, the WISE program was designed to provide personalized, extra instruction that is normally not available to economically disadvantaged students. We also aimed to expose economically disadvantaged students to the life experiences of college students, many of whom are from minority or economically disadvantaged backgrounds, thereby making college seem more attainable to them and changing their construal of their ability to attend college. Furthermore, we considered the workload that middle level educators who work in demographically challenged schools carry. The Writing to Inspire Successful Education (WISE) program provides personalized feedback on students' essays in a semi-virtual, intensive mentoring setting that was developed collaboratively as a university-school partnership.

The History of University-School Collaborations

Numerous university-school collaborations have been documented in the published literature. The two main types of university-school collaborations involve university professors providing training to school teachers and university students providing mentoring and/or tutoring to economically disadvantaged students. The most common university-school collaborations that have been documented in research articles involve university faculty training school teachers and restructuring curricula (Jetton, Cancienne & Greever, 2008). Unfortunately, interventions of this sort tend to take long periods of time, even years of extensive commitment, to have an effect (Wasonga, Rari & Wanzare, 2011).

We found three studies related to the WISE program model. The first study involves undergraduate students from the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) who taught underserved Latinx students how to read, write, and speak English as well as technology skills (Ek, 2010). This study is similar to our study in the sense that it uses mentoring to educate economically disadvantaged Latinx students. However, this study is not an empirical study. Rather, it is a qualitative study that identifies cultural crossings in university-school partnerships and provides recommendations for leaders of university-school partnerships based on Ek's experience in leading this program. The WISE program study, being an empirical study, extends upon this research by identifying effective practices for educating underserved economically disadvantaged students.

The second study is an evaluation of Project EXCITE, which is a university-school collaboration between the Northwestern University, the Evanston/Skokie School District 65, and the Evanston Township High School District 202. Research shows that project EXCITE was associated with large increases in standardized test scores in comparison to other economically disadvantaged minority students, nearly matching scores from non-economically disadvantaged students from different schools (Olszewski-Kubilius, P., Steenbergen-Hu, S., Thomson, D., & Rosen, R., 2016). Standardized tests used in this study include the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT), Explore, Measures of Academic Progress (MAP), Math Placement, and College placement exams. Project EXCITE, as it involves undergraduates mentoring underserved, economically disadvantaged minority students and measures the impact of the project on standardized test performance using an empirical method, is the most similar program to the Writing to Inspire Successful Education (WISE) program that we could find documented

as a research article in the academic literature. However, unlike the WISE program, project EXCITE does not focus on writing skills.

The third study by Friedman, Zibit, and Coote describes the implementation of a virtual mentoring program involving university professors and 54 low-performing students. In this study, Friedman et al. explain the benefits of the program and the difficulties that they faced along the way. Like the WISE program, they found that using technology to mentor the student was engaging. This study cites markedly high increases in number of drafts submitted when AlphaSmart word processing keyboards were used, namely more than a 500% increase in the number of multiple drafts submitted compared to when the AlphaSmarts were not used. However, technology sometimes proved to cause stress due to recurrent computer malfunction. The authors reported that having half of their new computers not working was normal due to network malfunction (Friedman et al., 2004). Though the problems encountered in the WISE program related to technology were not as severe as the ones presented here, it is important to note that this is a common risk in virtual mentoring programs that must be addressed with funding and IT personnel. Nonetheless, this study shows that adding technology into lesson plans, just as the WISE program model does, can make learning more engaging for students.

Method

Population Served

The partnering middle school in this project served 406 students in the fifth through the eighth grades during the 2015–2016 academic year. According to the school's Texas Education Agency (TEA) 2015–2016 Academic Performance Report, 99% of the students identified as Hispanic. Roughly 0.5 percent of students (3 of 406) identified as African American and another 0.5 percent (2 of 406) identified as White. The overwhelming majority of students—94% (382 of

406)—also received a free- or reduced-price lunch, which is an indicator of low-family income. Also, 31.5% of their students are ELLs. Thus, this school mostly serves students who have combinations of risk factors relevant for writing performance.

The team set two ambitious goals for this group of students. First, consistent with the mission of having the partner school's students achieve at the same level as their non-economically disadvantaged peers, one of the goals was to achieve the same percentage of proficient writing on the seventh grade State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) writing test as the state average for non-economically disadvantaged students. Second, to help students gain confidence in their ability to write well, the partner school district is primarily concerned with preparing their students to get accepted into college and to earn baccalaureate degrees. Thus, a proximal goal of WISE is to improve writing scores in the STAAR exam. A long-term goal is to increase the number of students who continue to develop their writing proficiency by taking advanced writing classes in high school or showing higher writing proficiency on standardized college admission tests. This study focused on proximal test score outcomes.

Participants

The WISE writing mentorship program connected 30 writing mentors from the University of Houston with 106 seventh grade students. The majority of these students are of demographically at-risk populations, many being of Hispanic origin, economically disadvantaged, and/or ELL students. Mentors consisted of a variety of majors, including English majors and non-English majors.

Measurement of Writing

The writing measures were focused on the seventh grade STAAR writing test. Students took the STAAR writing test in April of 2016. To measure writing growth in preparation for the STAAR, each semester, students wrote two on-demand benchmark essays using standardized writing prompts. The STAAR test results and benchmark scores were the primary sources of writing data in this study.

Benchmark prompts were chosen from previous STAAR tests or STAAR-prep materials and were never shown to students until the day of the test. Student writing was measured on a four-point STAAR writing rubric, which considers three key traits: organization, idea development, and language/writing conventions. The fourth essay was given the week before school ended, so it is likely that student investment during this particular exercise was not as intense as the previous three rounds. For this fourth essay, students spent less time brainstorming ideas and even less time drafting or revising their work than on previous exams.

The STAAR exam reports multiple score levels (unsatisfactory, satisfactory, and proficient, advanced, or commended). These are derived from four performance standards (did not meet grade level, approaches grade level, meets grade level, and masters grade level). The seventh-grade writing benchmark essays were scored following the same four-point scale used to score the essay portion of the STAAR writing exam. An essay score of one was deemed unsatisfactory (level I), an essay score of two or three was deemed satisfactory (level II), and an essay score of four was deemed proficient (e.g., commended or advanced, level III). The Texas Education Agency (TEA) provides comparisons of STAARs across demographic groups including low income students, ELL, and economically advantaged students. The participating school district provided seventh grade STAAR benchmarking essays that allowed comparisons with other schools within the partner district in Houston.

Procedures

Classroom Writing Intervention. The lead writing teacher at the WISE pilot school was tasked with teaching both Texas History and seventh-grade language arts writing standards. The study year was the first year the school organized the class in this manner. The scope of this combined approach included teaching about European exploration as well as instructing students on how to write an effective thesis statement. The majority of instruction time, however, was spent teaching students to become stronger writers. They journaled often, wrote about current events weekly, and participated in writer's workshops. The lead writing teacher at the WISE pilot school would set time aside during class for students to watch their mentor's videos and look at the comments that the mentor made on their essay via Google Docs. By the end of the year they had submitted and received feedback on 12 complete final draft essays and seven rough drafts. Lessons focused on guiding students through the writing process from brainstorming to revising using Google Docs and incorporating digital feedback from college students.

Mentoring Writing Intervention. Two levels of feedback were provided in the videos. One was so called "basic-level" writing skills feedback that attended to basic writing skills, such as punctuation, capitalization, and sentence structure. The other was higher order feedback that attended to organization, idea development, and congruence with the writing prompt. Mentors highlighted positive examples and prompted students to self-correct their errors. Videos often featured music, jokes, or creative media meant to engage students.

The intention of WISE was for the seventh graders to use the mentors' videos to improve their own writing. This was not systematically measured in this study. The writing teacher said that the digital feedback process was a strong motivator for students to complete weekly writing assignments (Teacher interview, March 2016). She reported that videos seemed to be very personally compelling to the students, as they often reviewed the videos many times. However, students were not necessarily attending to the specifics of writing feedback. For instance, the teacher stated that students often watched the videos seemingly for the simple enjoyment of the attention and positivity from the WISE mentor. At the very least, the videos also served to reinforce the weekly teaching objective in a creative and engaging way.

There was close coordination between WISE and the teacher. Every week, the writing teacher informed the mentors of what the students were learning in writing class that week, the prompt of the essay, and what she would like the mentors to focus on when providing feedback to the students that week. Thereby, this collaboration between college student writing mentors and the seventh-grade writing teacher provided effective, curriculum-driven feedback on the students' writing.

Outcome Evaluation Design

We took three approaches to compare effects of WISE on the pilot school students' scores on the STAAR seventh grade writing test. First, we compared the WISE pilot school's seventh-grade benchmark essay scores with the seventh-grade benchmark essay scores from other schools in the partner district. This analysis controls for overall cohort effects in the district (e.g., local history effects). Second, we compared the pilot school proficient/advanced/commended level scores, which is the target level of performance for the school district, with Texas State averages on the STAAR writing test. This analysis uses scores

from 2014 to 2017. Third, we conducted a comparison of writing proficiency scores over a four-year period using a quasi-experimental reversal design.

Description of the reversal design. The reversal design is quasi-experimental because the manipulations were not systematic. There was a complete change in school leadership at the start of the 2016-2017 academic year, with a new school leader (equivalent to the principal) and a new Dean of academics. This change in personnel disrupted the procedures and communication established during the 2015-2016 academic year. Furthermore, the writing teacher resigned her position after the fall semester of the 2016-2017 school year. This information suggests that teacher turnover and administrative delays caused the intervention to not be administered during the 2016-2017 year. Therefore, it is possible that extraneous logistic conditions, rather than the absence of the WISE program, may have contributed to the changes from the 2015-2016 to 2016-2017 year. The authors capitalized on a quasi-experimental reversal design to show the effects of WISE on seventh grade STAAR writing test performance. This experiment, plus the information on the development of this promising type of university-school service-learning partnership, provides a unique contribution to the education literature.

Results

Results of Four Benchmark Essays

We compared the benchmark essay scores of seven other middle schools from the partner district in the Houston area constituting a total of 1066 students with the students in WISE. This comparison shows that the WISE pilot school achieved higher growth in seventh grade commended or advanced (i.e., proficient) writing than the typical middle school from the partner district, as defined by the average growth across the rest of the district's middle schools. For example, district-wide benchmark tests were given in all partner district middle schools in

December and February. Average growth across all the partner district's seventh graders in Houston went from 4.41% to 8.15% in the proficient range, an overall increase of 3.77%. That is an 85% increase in proficient writing for the average middle school from the partner district in Houston. At the WISE pilot school, scores went from 6.60% to 14.18% in the proficient range, an overall increase of 8.21%, which is a 124% increase (Figure 1).

Only one school from the partner district showed a greater increase in the percentage of students writing in the proficient range, and this school did not have the same demographic risks as the other schools from the partner district. As shown in Table 1, 26.8% of the students at School 1 are ELL students, while 31.5% of students at the WISE pilot school are ELL students. 88% of the students at School 1 are economically disadvantaged, while 94% of students at the WISE pilot school are economically disadvantaged (2015-2016 Texas Academic Performance Reports, 2016).

Results of the STAAR Exam

The STAAR exam reports give three score ranges: unsatisfactory, satisfactory, and advanced, which is also known as proficient or commended. Figure 2 shows the results of the seventh grade STAAR writing test for 2013–2014, 2014–2015, 2015–2016, and 2016–2017. Figure 2 shows a different pattern at the WISE school than the general trend for the State of Texas. For purposes of comparison, the overall student average is provided along with the averages for non-economically disadvantaged, Latino, and economically disadvantaged students. These data were obtained from STAAR summary reports via the TEA website. During 2013–2014 and 2014–2015, students at the WISE pilot school performed about as expected based on their demographic characteristics, with only 2% scoring proficient in 2014 and only 3% scoring proficient in 2015. However, during 2015–2016, the year that WISE was introduced, the

percentage of students scoring in the proficient range rose to 15% (Texas Academic Performance Reports, 2017). This surpassed expectations for the demographic comparison groups and nearly achieved the level of proficiency for non-economically challenged students in 2015 (STAAR Statewide Summary Reports, 2017).

The pattern in Figure 2 is consistent with a reversal effect. Specifically, this is an AABA design, where A depicts the absence of the intervention and B depicts the presence of the intervention. The A conditions are found two years before the implementation of WISE (i.e., the 2013-14, and 2014-15 academic years), as well as the 2016-2017 year in which WISE was not fully implemented. The B condition was 2015-2016, which is the year in which WISE was introduced and fully implemented. The baseline trend predicted that 4% or 5% of the students would score in the proficient range. However, 15% of students reached the proficient range in 2016—about four times as many as expected. There was a return to baseline when the WISE program was not implemented, with the baseline trend predicting that about 6 or 7% of students would score in the proficient range. When this pattern of results, and other methodological circumstances are considered, it appears that WISE caused a unique increase in the percentage of students scoring in the proficient range on the STARR seventh grade writing test scores.

Results of End-of-Year Survey

An end-of-year survey was conducted by the WISE mentoring team in hopes of receiving feedback from the WISE pilot school students on how they felt about the program. The survey was administered by the seventh-grade writing teacher at the WISE pilot school, during class time shortly after the STAAR exam was administered. The survey was administered prior to anyone receiving any feedback about STAAR writing test performance.

The first part of the survey asked the student to rate the impact that the WISE program had on their writing skills as very negative, negative, neutral, positive, or very positive. A very large majority of the students, 89 out of 93 students who completed the survey, reported that WISE had a "positive" or "very positive" impact on their writing ability (Cohort Survey, April 2016). The second part of the survey asked the student to identify who had the greatest impact on their success on the STAAR writing exam with choices including WISE mentors, themselves, both WISE and themselves, or the teacher. About half of the students, 44 out of 93 students who completed the survey, believed that the WISE mentors had the greatest impact on their success on the STAAR writing exam. Most of the students, 49 of the 93, attributed success to themselves, which is consistent with the mentoring aim of WISE to encourage students to feel responsible for their academic performance. Very few attributed their success to only the seventh-grade writing teacher. This suggests that the students may have seen the WISE program as an inextricable aspect of the seventh-grade lead writing teacher's writing curriculum. This also speaks of the students' perceptions of how well the WISE program was integrated into the seventh-grade lead writing teacher's writing curriculum.

To provide further satisfaction information, students were given the option to write comments on what they thought about the program. Typical comments by students who thought they were helped by WISE were: "Well, before I was in 7th grade, I've always struggled with my grammar. But, when I met my mentor, everything changed." Another student wrote, "I know that my writing improved because I got commended on my writing benchmark. Now I know what all I learned this year really did help me change as a writer."

Even the students who did not attribute success to WISE were very positive about writing, offering comments such as: "It is important to write because it can tell who you are as a

person.", and "My year has been awesome because I changed as a writer." Their responses highlight their tendency to view their success with an internal locus of control.

Discussion

The results of this pilot study suggest that it is possible to develop an acceptable, feasible, and effective writing mentoring program that provides much-needed individual writing attention to middle school students with the help of college students under appropriate direction of a classroom teacher. Some sustainability problems were encountered in the 2016–2017 academic year related to administrative issues, thus creating a quasi-experimental reversal design for WISE. Some of these issues have been addressed. In the 2017–2018 academic year, WISE is being implemented in three middle schools. One of the changes supporting feasibility was WISE mentors and university staff undertaking larger roles in managing the project, thus easing the burden of project management on the teacher and school administrators.

The development and launch of the WISE program coincided with remarkable improvements in writing proficiency among a demographically high-risk population of seventh graders. This dramatic improvement stands out as unique relative to schools with similar demographic risk factors in the school district and compared to Texas averages. Furthermore, the quasi-experimental AABA reversal design eliminates some plausible alternative explanations to WISE causing the improvements, such as having a uniquely effective teacher, a uniquely effective curriculum, or widespread cohort effects. It is possible that this class of seventh graders at the middle school showed a remarkable increase in writing proficiency for some transient, unexplained reason. However, the impact of WISE appears to be the most plausible explanation.

Future controlled studies could settle this question but are very difficult to conduct in most school settings.

Of the various components of the WISE program model, the most plausible cause of change in writing performance is the meaningful, individualized writing feedback designed to help students grow as writers. The writing instruction at the WISE pilot school drew upon several innovative components that stressed individual feedback. Although technical writing feedback seems critically important, the quality of feedback may have been even more important. Given the disappointments of the past experiences with writing, it was necessary to create a safe and engaging context to receive feedback. The regular editing sessions, as well as encouraging feedback from the college mentors that was bolstered by teacher feedback and support, may have been the key ingredient for the students to improve much more than expected.

As addressed in the Results section, the satisfaction survey taken at the end of the year shows that 47.3% of students enrolled in the program believed that the WISE mentors had the greatest impact on their success on the STAAR writing exam. Furthermore, 95% of students believe that WISE had a "positive" or "very positive" impact on their writing ability. These results suggest that students are very receptive to WISE, and that programs like WISE could be well-received in other schools. We are currently testing this idea in the expansion to two additional schools in the 2017–2018 academic year.

Confidence in and comfort with peers was a qualitative observation that could be examined more closely in future evaluations of this and other writing programs. For students to simply have the courage to read their writing out loud in front of peers, teachers, or even family is a challenge and growth opportunity. The power of individualized, immediate feedback in a group context might never be fully quantifiable, but there are measures that can begin to tap this

phenomenon, such as reading and writing self-efficacy. The WISE mentoring and partner school's writing classroom were both designed to bolster self-efficacy, as well as closeness and comfort with others. These variables should be measured in future studies.

Conclusion

This case study demonstrates that the creation of writing intensive mentorships that pair university students with economically disadvantaged middle schoolers in a semi-virtual writing mentoring program is an effective strategy for closing the achievement gap. Also, this article suggests that an effective method of creating these writing mentorships is to develop university-school partnerships that provide intensive writing support to public school students preparing for high stakes writing exams, thereby aiding the normally overwhelmed teachers of demographically challenged schools in teaching essay writing skills. In this project, college students provided middle school students with individual feedback about writing performance on 19 occasions. The fact that WISE uses a combination of in-person mentoring and feedback provided by videos over the internet to increase availability of the college students makes the WISE program model unique. According to student surveys, there was high satisfaction with the program by students. In sum, WISE was a success objectively in regards to test scores and subjectively in regards to student satisfaction.

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Figures

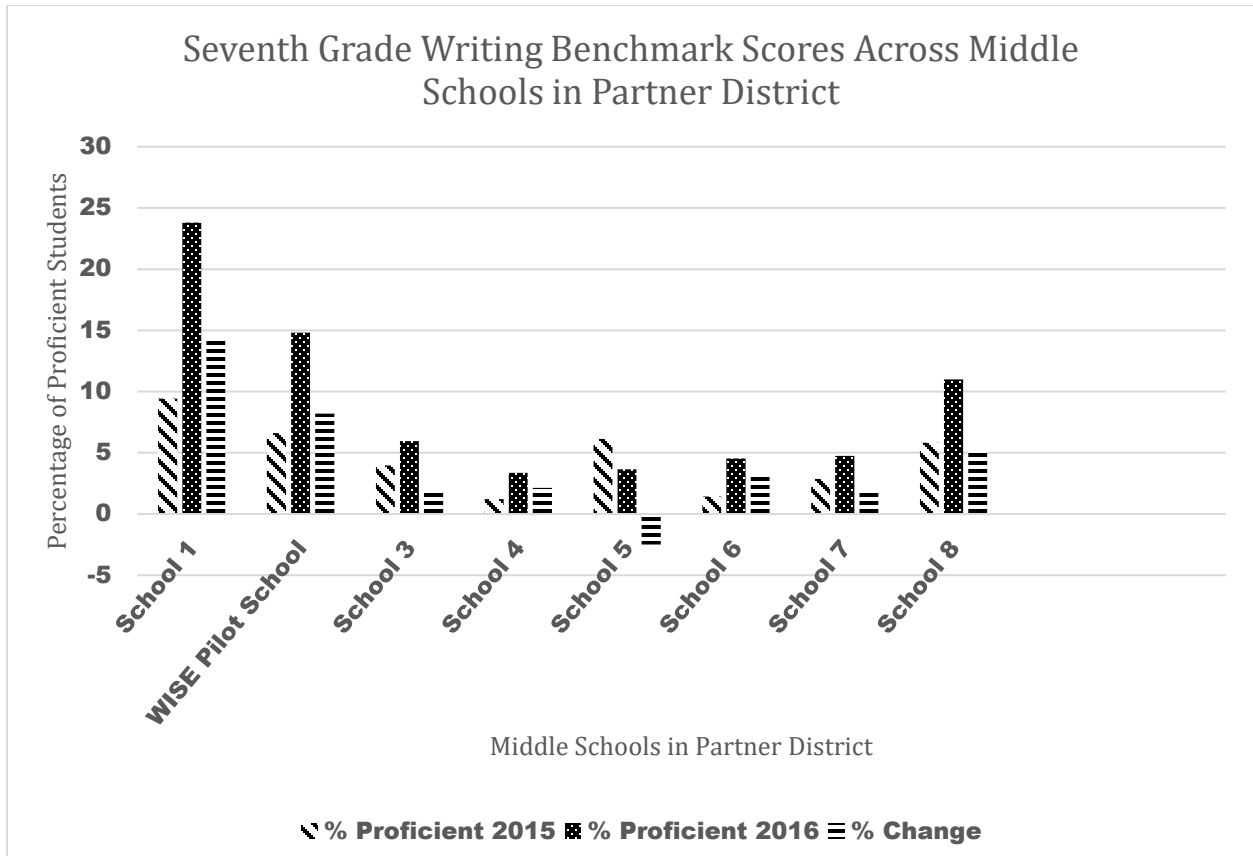


Figure 1. Seventh graders from the WISE pilot school score second highest on end of year writing benchmark exams in the partner school district. This figure illustrates the percentage of seventh graders from each school who scored at the proficient level on both benchmarks administered in Fall 2015, the percentage scoring proficient on both Spring 2016 benchmarks, and the change in the percentage of students who scored at the proficient level between the beginning of the school year and the end of the school year.

School Name	% ELL	% Economically Disadvantaged	% Latino	% African American
School 1	26.8%	88%	83%	16%
WISE Pilot School	31.5%	94%	99%	<1%
School 3	31.8%	93%	70%	25%
School 4	No data	83%	93%	2%
School 5	17.2%	93%	46%	50%
School 6	20.6%	91%	60%	39%
School 7	56.0%	96%	86%	14%
School 8	12.0%	86%	26%	72%

Table 1. The WISE pilot school has one of the highest risk demographic profiles in the state of Texas. This table indicates the proportion of students in several partner district middle schools who would be considered to be part of certain high-risk demographic groups.

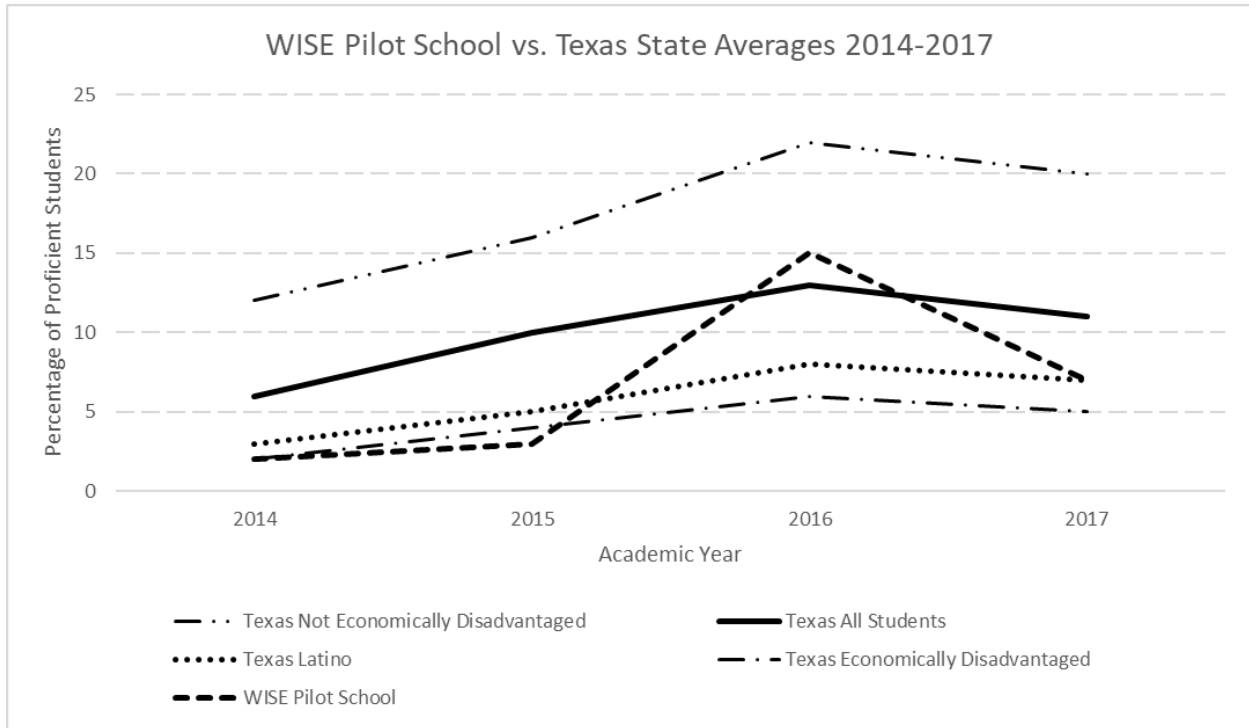


Figure 2. Seventh graders at the WISE pilot school outperform Texas average when WISE is integrated into seventh grade writing curricula. This figure illustrates the change in percent advanced students from year to year by demographic category, focusing on the 2015-2016 year, which is when WISE was introduced.