

## **An Interview With Gail Ciecierski, Language Arts Teacher, Retired, House McCarthy, Glenfield Middle School, Montclair, NJ**

*Note: The interviewer, Tommy Crawford, was a student of Gail Ciecierski's when he was at Glenfield Middle School and trained as a writing coach at Montclair High School. He is now a Yale undergrad and an editorial assistant on the Website Project.*

### **How long have you worked with The Writers' Room™ Program?**

I've been with it since its inception in the early nineties.

### **What do you think is most helpful about it?**

It's great to get another reader in. When someone else makes a comment, for instance, about structure or syntax, it reinforces what I'm saying to the students. It's not just the teacher making a comment; it's someone else.

One of the most valuable things The Writers' Room™ Program does is to provide a first reading. This is indispensable. For one, students can immediately start revising. They don't turn something in and wait three days before they get anything back. With same-day revision, they can go home and revise immediately. To be able to meet individually with coaches when they revise is a tremendous help.

### **Do you feel comfortable having coaches in the classroom?**

Absolutely. They've been through a six-week training program developed by Ellen Kolba and Sheila Crowell, the founders of The Writers' Room™ Program. And each school has a coach manager who has gone through another training program so that standards are maintained from school to school and grade to grade.

Our coach managers are invaluable. We meet with the coach manager when we plan new assignments—and we estimate how long the project will take, decide how many times the coaches will be here, and so on. We also talk over problems that might come up in the project. We think of the coach manager as part of our instructional team.

Our students trust the coaches, because they know they all have the same approach and that teachers and coaches really work together. Coaches also get a chance to read out loud something that a student has written. (Of course they ask the student's permission first.) Maybe it's a word or a phrase that captures an idea or maybe it's a bit of dialog. That kind of sharing also gets across the idea that there are good ideas in lots of papers—not just the ones that get the final A.

### **How do the students respond?**

Well, Tommy, you remember. Sometimes there's groaning, but that's because revision is hard work. It's always a very personal thing, filled with surprises. For example, I was working with a student one day and we were slogging through revision ideas when suddenly he started laughing. He had figured out what to do with a character. Then we both started laughing—what a relief and what a great end to the day!

**The high school has student coaches. How do you feel about middle school student coaches?**

The kids are really good at responding to each other's work. But they would need to be trained, just the way you were at the high school. But the real problem is one of scheduling—what classes would the 8th graders be missing if they coached 6th graders?

But I've seen coaching happen in my own eighth grade class. A student came in from another district where they didn't do much writing. He was floundering, and then one of our best writers, who had been in the program since 5th grade, asked if she could see what he'd done. So he gave it to her, and she read it and started talking just like a coach—first saying what she thought he should keep, and so on. They stayed after school too.

**So, another reason you like The Writers' Room™ Program's approach is that they always begin with what works in a student paper?**

Yes, absolutely. It's always easy to say what's wrong. It takes training and sensitivity to find out the good ideas you want to keep.

**Can you measure ways The Writers' Room™ Program is effective?**

I'll tell you – and I just told this to the CUNY people – if you want to decide about The Writers' Room™ Program, if you question the effectiveness and veracity of the program or want to know how it works, go into the classroom and see it in full force. See the comments, see the coaches in action, and see the way it works in the classroom. Only then can you make a decision.