CALIBER

EVALUATION OF THE *DO THE WRITE THING* CHALLENGE

Final Report

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EVALUATION OF THE *DO THE WRITE THING* CHALLENGE

1. INTRODUCION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Youth violence in the United States is an undeniable problem. In 2002 more than 877,700 young people ages 10 to 24 received injuries that required hospitalization as a result of acts of violence (NCICP, 2004). Equally alarming is the fact that 5,486 youth in the same age bracket were murdered in 2001—an average of 15 young people a day (NCICP, 2004). In 2003, 33 percent of students nationwide said they had been in at least one physical altercation in the 12 months prior to the survey's administration (Grunbaum, Kann, Kinchen, Ross, Hawkins, Lowry, et al., 2004). That same study revealed disturbing evidence that 17 percent of students had carried a weapon on one or more of the 30 days preceding the survey.

1.1 Violence in the Home, School, and Community

Practically everywhere young people turn they are faced with some type of violence. Whether they are being bullied at school, pressured to join gangs, or even just watching the evening news, it is impossible for most youth to escape exposure on some level. Indeed, even home is not necessarily a violence-free environment for many young people. Many youth experience or are exposed to domestic violence in their homes and virtually all are exposed to media violence in the home environment. In fact, it is estimated that every year, over 3 million children are exposed[1] to either verbal or physical domestic violence (Osofsky, 1999). Furthermore, the average day of a young person is consumed with over four hours of television, computers, videotaped movies, and video games, the content of which can include significant violence. A report by Smith and Donnerstein (1998) on findings from the National Television Violence Survey (NTVS) contended that:

- 61 percent of television programs contain some violence
- 40 percent of programs feature "bad" characters who are never or rarely punished for their aggressive actions
- Nearly 75 percent of violent scenes on television feature no immediate punishment for or condemnation of violence.

Community violence also is a problem for many young people in our society. Results from a national survey of law enforcement agencies across the country found that 2300 cities in the U.S. experienced youth gang activity in 2002 (Egley & Major, 2004). Additionally, the Department of Justice reports that nearly four million adolescents have been victims of a serious

[1] According to Osofsky (1999), exposure is defined as seeing or hearing the actual abuse or dealing with the aftermath of the abuse.

physical assault, and nine million have witnessed serious violence during their lifetime (Kilpatrick & Saunders, 1997).

Despite what goes on in children's homes and communities, schools ideally should be a safe haven for kids; however, this is not the reality for many students. In a violence-related survey administered to 1,200 principals in elementary and middle schools across the country, 57 percent reported that one or more incidents of crime and/or violence requiring law enforcement involvement occurred in their school during the 1996-97 school year (Heaviside, Rowand, Williams, & Farris, 1998). Moreover, a growing area of concern in schools is the issue of bullying. According to a study on the prevalence of bullying in the U.S., more than one of every six students in grades 6 through 10 reported that they are bullied "sometimes," and more than one in 12 said they endure bullying at least once a week (Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, & Scheidt, 2001).

The prevalence of youth violence in this country has compelled the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to call youth violence a public health issue (DHHS, 2001). Across the United States, schools and communities feel its effects in one way or another. It is not surprising, then, that nearly all U.S. schools currently implement some type of delinquency prevention curriculum as part of their effort to fight back (NIJ, 2004). In response to the overall problem of violence in schools, 78 percent of principals surveyed reported employing some type of formal violence prevention or reduction program in their schools (NIJ, 2004).

1.2 Prevention Programming and Building Protective Assets in Youth

According to a report by the Surgeon General, in order to design a successful youth violence prevention strategy, one must identify and understand the risk and protective factors associated with youth violence (DHHS, 2001). Risk factors are determinants that increase the chance of a person being harmed. A protective factor is defined as an individual or environmental characteristic that safeguards youth from effects of risk. Though we know much about risk factors for youth violence, such as history of early aggressive behavior and exposure to violence and family conflict, somewhat less is known about protective factors in this area (DHHS, 2001). That said, some research has proposed that protective factors include, but are not limited to, intolerant attitude toward deviance, positive social orientation, and commitment to school (DHHS, 2001).

Similar to protective factors, the Search Institute established 40 Developmental Assets that are "concrete common sense, positive experiences and qualities essential to raising successful young people" (Search, 2004). Some of these assets are: a caring school climate; skills in peaceful conflict resolution; a positive view of the future; and living in a community that

values youth and perceives them as a resource (e.g., a community that gives youth a useful role to play in the community) (Best Practice, 2002). In an effort to assess the presence or absence of these assets in children's lives, the Search Institute asked over 250,000 middle and high school students in grades 6 through 12 to complete a self-report survey identifying the assets they possess. Findings from the survey revealed an indirect relationship between the number of assets that an adolescent reported and the presence of risky behaviors. In short, the study confirmed the hypothesis that adolescents who possess a large numbers of assets will likely be involved in fewer risky behaviors. Conversely, adolescents possessing a low number of assets will tend to be involved in many risky behaviors.

A study by Donovan (1995) tested a similar theory that when teens are provided with an opportunity that allows them to be part of a solution to crime prevention, they receive a positive response from the community and therefore feel valued by other members of society. This study documented that when youth take part in something such as a service project that aims to better the community, it fosters within them the development of positive qualities such as self-esteem, critical thinking, and problem solving. And again, these positive (or protective) assets have been linked with lower levels of risky behaviors that include violence.

1.3 Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Prevention Programming for Youth

Prevention programming, therefore, attempts to foster these assets and protective factors in youth. Many school-based prevention programs that target such areas as substance abuse prevention, teen pregnancy prevention, and violence prevention take this tack. Because youth violence prevention is a relatively new field, only limited evaluation findings are available for many programs. However, results of a few studies have begun to indicate the effectiveness and potential of the positive asset development approach to prevention programming for youth (DHHS, 2001). Evaluation findings from three prevention programs, including Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT); the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program; and The LifeSkills Training (LST) program are described below.

Gang Resistance Education and Training, or G.R.E.A.T, is a school-based program for middle school students that is prevention-focused. Its aim is to "immunize" youth against delinquency, youth violence, and gang membership. G.R.E.A.T. is instructed by a law enforcement officer in school classrooms. Lessons center around life skills that will help students avoid delinquent behavior and use nonviolent ways to solve problems.

The national evaluation of G.R.E.A.T. yielded preliminary findings based on a cross-sectional survey of 5,935 eighth grade students from 42 schools in 11 different communities where G.R.E.A.T. has been implemented. When compared to students in a comparison group

who did not complete G.R.E.A.T., the students who had completed the program were found to have:

- More pro-social behaviors and attitudes
- A higher level of perceived guilt at committing deviant acts
- Fewer friends involved in delinquent activity
- Lower likelihood of engaging in risky behavior
- Lower levels of perceived blocks to academic success (Ebensen & Osgood, 1997).

According to the results of this study, G.R.E.A.T. appears to produce many of the positive assets that may protect against the risk of youth violence.

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program is a universal intervention designed to reduce and prevent bullying. It is primarily a school-based program with school employees responsible for its implementation. The program targets elementary and middle school students, and the curriculum includes school-wide, classroom, and individual components. The school-wide component involves a survey to assess the prevalence of bullying; the classroom component ensures the enforcement of class rules against bullying; and the individual component includes one-on-one interventions with bullies and or their victims (Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999). Studies have found that this program results in:

- A substantial reduction in boys' and girls' reports of bullying and victimization
- A significant reduction in students' reports of general antisocial behavior such as vandalism, fighting, theft, and truancy
- A significant improvement in the "social climate" of the class, as reflected in students' reports of improved order and discipline, more positive social relationship, and a more positive attitude toward schoolwork and school (Olweus, et al., 1999).

Outcomes from the evaluation of the Bullying Intervention program are very promising. It appears that not only does the program help to reduce bullying, it improves classroom climate as well. This is very meaningful because, as Sautter (1995) explains, "aggressive and disruptive behavior in the classroom often leads to poor school performance and destructive peer relationships, which in turn contribute to the 'trajectory toward' violence."

Though the LifeSkills® Training (LST) program is mainly focused around the issue of reducing and preventing substance abuse, it aims to achieve this goal by way of influencing psychological and social factors much as the programs mentioned above. The implementation of

LST involves a series of classroom sessions delivered over 3 years. There are two curricula for the program, one for elementary school (8 to 11 years old) and one for middle school (11 to 14 years old) (SAMHSA, 2004).

Among other activities, the sessions involve discussion and the opportunity to enhance students' self esteem, feelings of self-efficacy, and ability to make decisions. Providing that they succeed in enhancing these qualities, they will be substantially less likely to take part in high-risk behaviors (SAMHSA, 2004). The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism reported that in one study of LST that compared the treatment group with a control, the former had:

- 54 percent fewer drinks in the past month
- 73 percent fewer reports of heavy drinking
- 79 percent fewer reports of getting drunk at least once a month (SAMHSA, 2004).

Results of this LifeSkills® Training evaluation demonstrate that the program has the ability to reduce risky behaviors associated with substance use. It is reasonable then to assume that enhancing students' decision making skills and their feelings of self-efficacy may influence their decisions to partake in other risky behavior, such as youth violence.

While studies such as those mentioned above have shown that prevention programming that increases protective factors can be promising, it is widely believed that certain implementation components may be necessary for a prevention programming to enjoy such success. For example, studies have found that in order to achieve effective prevention programming, specific guidelines must be in place. One study revealed that having a manual or a structured training curriculum for the program was important for successful implementation (NIJ, 2004). Additionally, the following were reported to be predictors of high-quality programs:

- Extensive and high-quality training
- Support of the program by the school principal
- Activities are highly structured
- Programs are locally initiated
- Multiple sources of information are used
- Activities are highly supervised
- Activities are integrated into the regular school program (NIJ, 2004).

1.4 Introduction to the *Do the Write Thing* Program Challenge

As can be seen, violence is a pervasive and pertinent problem in the lives of our youth. Through many youth violence prevention programs, adults provide young people with information and skills meant to direct them on a path that leads away from violence. The *Do the Write Thing* program (DtWT), on the other hand, gives students the opportunity to express their experiences with and ideas about youth violence *to adults* and to challenge *them* to work alongside students to implement appropriate and meaningful solutions to violence in their schools and communities.

Primarily funded by the Kuwait-America Foundation in appreciation of U.S. efforts during the Gulf War, the National Campaign to Stop Violence (NCSV) seeks to reduce violence in communities and schools throughout the country. The *Do the Write Thing* Challenge is an initiative of NCSV that began as a pilot program in Washington, DC from 1994 through 1996. The program has expanded, and 23 local programs across the country participated in the Challenge in 2003–2004.

Program Goals and Objectives

The DtWT Challenge is designed to encourage middle school youth to share their experiences with youth violence as well as to voice their opinions about ways to reduce the problem of youth violence within their schools and community. The Challenge encourages students to participate in classroom discussions in order to share their experiences with youth violence with classmates, and also to brainstorm possible solutions to the problem. In addition, the program seeks to empower youth to take a stand against violence by writing messages either in the form of essays, songs, or poems that symbolize their personal commitment not to engage in violent acts.

According to the Operations Manual for the *Do the Write Thing* Challenge, the primary objectives of the program are to:

- Motivate students in middle schools to make a personal written commitment to not engage in violent acts
- Motivate students in middle schools to do something positive to reduce youth violence in their community
- Provide students with the opportunity to educate adults in their community about the causes and solutions for youth violence
- Motivate adults to work with students in their communities to develop and implement programs which reduce youth violence (DtWT Operations Manual, p. 2).

How the *Do the Write Thing* Challenge Works

In order to achieve these objectives, the program has developed two primary components. For the first component, middle school teachers facilitate discussions in their 7th and 8th grade classrooms so that their students may discuss their experiences with violence with their peers and propose solutions to the problem of youth violence. The second is a voluntary writing component in which students are asked to respond to three questions: ***How has violence affected my life? What are the causes of violence? What can I do about violence?*** By choosing to write about the problem and to submit their entries into the Challenge, students are making a commitment to nonviolence.

Once teachers have submitted all of the essays they receive to the local DtWT program, panels of judges are convened by the local Program Chair in each DtWT community to review student entries and to assess their responsiveness to these three questions. The panel of judges ultimately selects two school finalists—one girl and one boy—from each participating middle school who have developed the most thoughtful responses to these questions, and who also evoke a high level of emotion through their words. These local semi-finalists are then recognized at local award ceremonies. Next, a boy and a girl are selected to represent each DtWT community as National Finalists. These students are recognized at the annual National Award Ceremony that is held in Washington, DC, every summer. In addition, each year a book of writings by the National Finalists is compiled and placed in the Library of Congress.

2. EVALUATION OF THE *DO THE WRITE THING* CHALLENGE

2.1 Evaluation Purpose

This qualitative study of the *Do the Write Thing* program was designed to be exploratory and descriptive. The purpose was to gain a more complete understanding of the experiences of those who implement and participate in the program across localities. Specifically, we were interested in describing the meaning that program stakeholders place on their involvement with the program and their perceptions of how it impacts them and their communities. Study findings may be used to enhance program implementation and may also be used to craft future surveys or other evaluative activities so that they are more closely aligned with participant experiences. The current study addressed three primary process and outcome-related research questions:

- What does the *Do the Write Thing* program look like across localities (i.e., how is it implemented in various classrooms, schools, and communities in the different program localities across the country)?

- What influence has *Do the Write Thing* had on students who participate in the program related to such things as increased knowledge, opportunity, self-concept, and commitment to nonviolence?

- In what ways has *Do the Write Thing* affected teachers, schools, and communities in terms of the integration of student ideas into policy and program reform, improved student-teacher relationships, and the proliferation of extracurricular activities or programs to address youth violence in the school and/or community?

2.2 Evaluation Methods

Participant and Stakeholder Interviews

Qualitative methods were employed in order to explore the answers to these research questions. Specifically, semi-structured phone interviews and in-depth, in-person interviews were conducted with different samples of *Do the Write Thing* program stakeholders in order to understand their experiences with and perspectives about the program. The use of semi-structured interviews ensured that many of the same questions were asked within stakeholder groups, thus allowing for comparability across respondents. At the same time, the flexibility of semi-structured protocols permitted the interviewer to be flexible enough to probe more deeply into the different individual experiences of interview respondents in order to capture the range of those experiences. All interview protocols used in this evaluation of DtWT are included in the Appendix.

Sample. One sample of respondents was identified for each of three primary stakeholder groups: local program Chairs; teachers; and student National Finalists. The entire population of Chairs (N=23) was targeted for interviews, so no sampling strategy was employed.

For the teacher sample, two teachers from each locality (N=46) were selected for interviews based on a list of schools and teachers provided to us by local program Chairs. Schools on this list were then separated according to whether or not they had a National Finalist. From each of these two new lists (one list of schools with a 2004 National Finalist and one list of schools without), we stratified schools by locality and randomly selected one teacher from each locality. Ultimately, then, our sample included two teachers from each locality—one whose student became a National Finalist and one whose student did not. In addition, a sample of student National Finalists was drawn. A list of 2004 National Finalists was stratified by gender, and 10 girls and 10 boys (N=20) were selected at random to be interviewed.

Response. In sum, 76 qualitative interviews were conducted for this evaluation of the *Do the Write Thing* program. Phone interviews with Chairs were mainly completed in August 2004. A total of 21 out of 23 Chairs (or, in one instance, a designee of the local Chair) were

therefore, outcomes related to the impact of program participation on students may be skewed in that direction.

Findings also could have been enhanced by interviewing respondents a second time in order to probe more deeply in relation to the major themes that emerged, or to clarify responses from the initial interviews that were not always clear. Nor were resources available to conduct member checks with interview respondents in order to present findings to them to ensure that they were presented accurately and appropriately in the report.

Despite these limitations, the data presented here provide valuable descriptive information concerning the ways in which program participants and implementers believe the program is affecting individuals, schools, and communities. Future studies of the *Do the Write Thing* program may draw from these data to develop sound and valid indicators and quantitative measures of program effectiveness and potentially could apply such measures to a larger proportion of DtWT program participants and stakeholders.

3. DESCRIPTION OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS AND NEED FOR PREVENTION PROGRAMMING

As mentioned, data were collected from three groups of program stakeholders: local Chairs, teachers who implement the DtWT program in their classrooms, and National Finalists. The following paragraphs briefly describe the study participants, including their perceptions of the need for violence prevention programming such as DtWT in their schools and communities.

3.1 Description of Study Participants and Their Communities

Local Program Chairs

The DtWT program could not function without Local program Chairs who serve several diverse and essential roles. During interviews, local Chairs described their main responsibilities as: program coordination; public relations; fundraising; and recruitment and program expansion. Among the 21 Chairs who were interviewed, just over one-third currently hold positions as judge or are retired judges. Four local program Chairs are affiliated with a University or College, and four Chairs are practicing attorneys. Other Chairs report working in various social service and business capacities.

Almost one-half of Chairs reported that they became involved with the program after being recruited by the National Program Director for DtWT. The remainder of Chairs mentioned that they were referred to the program through work colleagues or that they had been appointed to their position by state commissions or governors. Three-fourths of Chairs reported that they

had been involved with DtWT for two to five years. However, two of the Chairs reported that the 2003-2004 academic year was their first working with the program, and one Chair has been involved since the program's inception.

Teachers

The 35 teachers interviewed for the evaluation of DtWT reported that they have been teaching middle school for anywhere from 2 to 25 years. The average number of years that they have been teaching middle school is 10. Teachers in our sample had integrated the DtWT program in their classroom from between one to nine years. However, slightly more than half of teacher respondents said they implemented DtWT for the first time during the 2003–2004 school year.

Student National Finalists

Among the National Finalists included in the interview sample, nine were in 7th grade and 11 were in 8th grade when they submitted their written entries to the DtWT program. About one-half of the boys and one-third of the girls we spoke with came from single-parent families. And although students were not asked to report on the socio-economic status of their family, approximately one-half of teachers indicated that the students they teach come from low-income backgrounds.

Each of the 20 student interview respondents articulated their future ambitions, some with greater assurance and anticipation than others. When asked what they wanted to be when they grow up, student responses ranged from forensic scientist to wildlife photographer. Boys often dreamed of becoming sports stars or, as a backup plan, of following in the footsteps of their fathers (or uncles). Almost half of all girls thought they might want to pursue writing as a career. As one young women explained her interest in becoming an author, "Because I'm feeling that I do have things for the world to hear."

Community Descriptions

Interview respondents were asked to provide a description of their communities. Three-fourths of teachers discussed how the communities in which they teach are ethnically and/or racially diverse, whereas half of Chairs reported that their community has a very diverse population. Other Chairs explained that their local communities are comprised mainly of an ethnic minority. Just over three-fourths of teachers and half of Chairs also mentioned that their schools are located in an urban setting.

Over half of the National Finalists who were interviewed described their communities as urban, while over one-third said they come from a suburban setting. Just one student reported living in a rural community. While almost one-third of students had nothing negative to say about their neighborhoods, nearly the same percentage complained about frequent exposure to drugs and violence. Yet even the youth from dangerous and downtrodden neighborhoods were quick to name positive attributes of their environments, such as being surrounded by family and close friends and the familiar comforts of home.

3.2 Perceived Need for Prevention Programming

Local DtWT Chairs, teachers, and National Finalists cited numerous reasons why there is a need for DtWT within their local community. The most commonly cited responses included: high rates of community and school violence, the need to increase the awareness level of adults regarding the problem of youth violence, and the need for and benefits of kids having a voice and a vehicle to express their ideas about and experiences with youth violence.

High Rates of Youth Violence

As previously mentioned, approximately one-third of the National Finalists interviewed complained about frequent exposure to drugs and violence. Further, nearly one-third of Chairs indicated that their schools and communities experience high rates of youth violence, which translates into a need for youth violence prevention programming such as DtWT. One Chair described the need in this manner:

> These kids are confronted with issues of violence in their own community and in their own schools on a daily basis. We're noticing in the writings that kids are talking about the kinds of violence that they witness in their own schools and their communities, including violence that they witness in their own homes.

DtWT teachers also frequently cited that their communities struggle with youth violence and need to find solutions. Twenty-one of 35 teachers interviewed mentioned that they felt violence was a problem in their community, while twenty teachers commented that they thought it was a problem in their school. One teacher from an urban school lamented, "We know for a fact that there are some children involved with gangs, that's just a given." At the same time, a teacher from a suburban school explained, "Youth violence is a problem everywhere. [Although] we don't have the same type of problems that the inner city has, we have a lot of the bullying." Yet another teacher felt that school and community cannot be separated, saying, "sometimes what happens in the community is carried into the school and what happens in the school is carried

into the community. We can't deal with one in isolation of the other, everything must be integrated." Only four of the teachers in our sample did not feel that violence is a problem either in their school or in their community.

Teachers who agreed that violence was a problem either at their school or in their community were asked to explain whether they felt that *Do the Write Thing* was a solution to this problem. Nearly all answered that they considered the program to be part of a solution, but that other measures need to be taken in order to fully address the problem. As one teacher explained, "*Do the Write Thing* is a tool to work towards a solution. It's not the be-all-and-end-all, but it's another tool that is very helpful for this age group." Another teacher who described violence as "an omnipresent entity in the community" called DtWT "a step in the right direction."

Increase Awareness Regarding the Issue of Youth Violence

Another theme commonly cited by both Chairs and National Finalists was the need to increase community awareness regarding the issue of youth violence. Nearly one quarter of Chairs reported that adults living in their locality could be made more aware of the frequency and degree to which youth experience violence within their community.

National Finalists also provided information to suggest that there was a real need to increase the level of awareness regarding the problem of youth violence within their school and community. When National Finalists were asked to provide information on the reasons why they believed it was critical to express their ideas to adults, about one-quarter mentioned that it was important that adults were educated in order to increase their understanding about how prevalent the problem of youth violence was within their school and community.

Give Students a Voice Regarding the Problem of Youth Violence

Both National Finalists and Chairs agreed that is was essential to give students a voice regarding the problem of violence. Nearly one-quarter of Chairs explained how youth within their community often feel isolated and lack an outlet for expressing their thoughts and feelings. These Chairs reported that DtWT provides an opportunity for these students to express themselves and realize that they are not alone in their experiences with youth violence.

Among the 20 students who were interviewed, seven believed that it was important to "give students a voice," since they are the ones who experience youth violence and will therefore have the best understanding of the issue. Students also reasoned that since they are the next generation of leaders in America, they need to be empowered to express their thoughts and ideas. In addition, nearly one-third of the National Finalists we interviewed reported that it is critical to give students a voice so that they do not keep all of their thoughts and emotions bottled up inside

of them. This group of students felt that writing about their emotions helps them release stress. Only two National Finalists reported that they did not think it was important for kids to express their ideas to adults, because they did not think that it would make a difference in the long run.

Based on interviews with local program Chairs, teachers, and National Finalists, it is apparent that there is a real necessity for youth violence prevention programming within the communities where DtWT is being implemented. The following sections of this report will outline how DtWT is being implemented in various communities throughout the country and will offer insight into the influence that the program is having on program participants, schools, and communities.

4. RESEARCH QUESTION #1: WHAT DOES THE *DO THE WRITE THING* PROGRAM LOOK LIKE ACROSS LOCALITIES?

One of the central areas of focus for the evaluation of the *Do the Write Thing* Program was to examine what the program looked like across various localities. In order to answer this research question, the evaluation team collected process evaluation data on how the program was being implemented in various schools and classrooms across the country. A sample of local Chairs and DtWT teachers were interviewed in order to determine variations in program recruitment strategies, training activities, classroom program components, writing program components, judging strategies, collaborating partners, and local award ceremony events. These data are presented in the following pages and will help inform the national DtWT office as to the range of implementation strategies across localities, as well as site reports of particularly successful strategies.

4.1 School Recruitment

Do the Write Thing program Chairs recruit school participation and support for the DtWT Program using a variety of more or less formal strategies. The large majority of Chairs recruit schools by initially approaching school superintendents either by attending a meeting, sending some sort of written communication, or contacting them via telephone. Once Chairs have obtained the support of the superintendent for the program, superintendents often make the initial contact with schools, many of which are reportedly convinced to participate year after year since DtWT can be integrated easily into the school curriculum and can be folded into other school safety programs/efforts. One-fourth of Chairs reported that they make presentations to superintendents, principals, and teachers in order to recruit school participation. One Chair described this recruitment strategy reporting that:

> To get the schools involved, I make a call to the superintendent and have always been received very positively and then we have a

> joint meeting and a presentation to the superintendent, the head of their English department, or their Writing department, their counselors, and any representatives for the district itself. And then we outline the calendar, the requirements, and we just go on from there.

In one instance, a program Chair solicited the support from the mayor to become the program's honorary Chair and also recruited business, civic, and religious leaders to be on the executive panel for the program. This strategy proved to be a great success for the site by helping to increase buy-in and participation from superintendents, principals, teachers, and other collaborating partners. Last year alone this same DtWT locality received a total of 5,000 entries for their local Challenge, demonstrating the importance of soliciting program support from people of influence within a community in order to increase widespread awareness of and participation with the program.

4.2 Teacher Training

The extent of training that schools receive on DtWT is frequently limited to the information in the Teachers Packet provided by the national office, according to interview data obtained from both Chair and teacher interviews. The Teacher's Packet, prepared by the National Campaign to Stop Violence, typically is supplied to schools by the local program Chairs from each community. Almost half of the Chairs reported that they provide information and training to participating schools in this way. Nearly all teachers interviewed said they had received the packet of information about the *Do the Write Thing* program.[2] These teachers described the packet in various ways. Most teachers said that it included literature to explain the program to children, suggestions for class discussions, and sample entries. Other teachers mentioned using the packet as a basic guide, but talked about additional tools that had been accessible to them such as Web sites, lessons plans, and videos.

While the majority of Chairs and teachers reported that schools typically only receive information on the program that is provided in the Teacher's Packet, a small proportion of DtWT Chairs and instructors provided examples of alternative strategies used for distributing program information to schools. Texas reported a particularly well-developed strategy for keeping schools informed and providing them with helpful resources to implement their DtWT programs. Nearly one-third of all DtWT communities are located in the state of Texas. As a result of the high level of participation in the state, the Texas DtWT Challenge has developed a Web site for information sharing and cross-site learning for each of its seven communities. Schools

[2] Concerning the origins of the manual that teachers spoke about, six teachers reported that the packet of information had come from the National *Do the Write Thing* office and another three recalled the information as being disseminated through the Department of Education, the school district, and the Juvenile Justice Center.

participating in the DtWT Challenge can refer to this Web site for program instructions and information for each community implementing the program in the state. This Web site provides a wide array of information for schools such as a downloadable packet of information with instructions for teachers; examples of lessons plans that can be used with various classroom subjects (i.e., language arts, social studies, health); and contact information for communities wishing to start up the DtWT program within their town or school district. Two teachers reported going to the *Do the Write Thing* Web site in order to obtain more information about the program. One Program Chair, who represents a locality outside that the state of Texas, reportedly used the Web site to obtain examples of lessons plans since her locality did not provide teachers with any such resources. The Web site created for the *Do the Write Thing* Texas Challenge can be a useful tool not only for DtWT communities located in the state of Texas, but also for communities throughout the country that would like additional information on ways to implement the program.

Additionally, a small number of Chairs reported that they provided teachers and schools with a booklet of winning DtWT entries from past years to supplement the Teacher's Packet. As mentioned, a couple of Chairs also reported having made presentations at participating schools in order to provide teachers, guidance counselors, and principals with an overview and history of the program. In one instance, a teacher said she had received instruction from the "Chief Probation Officer" and that she emailed with him regularly about the program. One teacher said that she was provided with a video about the program to show to her class. Another two teachers said they had received lesson plans along with the packet. Three of the teachers interviewed described the program as being "self-taught" or based on "trial and error," and a small percentage of teachers said they had received no training on the *Do the Write Thing* program.

A small number of teachers reported that they felt that the information that they received in the Teacher's Packet was inadequate and they wished they had received more formalized training. Therefore, it may be useful for DtWT localities to consider adopting additional training strategies in order to enhance and expand on the instruction that schools are provided in the Teacher's Packet. In addition, some teachers suggested that they would greatly benefit from the opportunity to meet in a forum with other DtWT teachers in order to exchange information and ideas related to program implementation strategies.

4.3 Classroom Implementation

The number of years that DtWT instructors have been using the program in their classroom ranged from one to nine years among the sample of thirty-five DtWT instructors who were interviewed. However, at the time of the interviews, slightly more than half of these teachers had implemented DtWT only once, their first time being the 2003–2004 school year.

Fewer than one-third of teachers interviewed had taught the program twice, and the remaining instructors had taught the program somewhere between three to nine years.

Classroom Component

DtWT is usually administered to seventh and eighth grade students. However, two teachers reported that it was offered to students in grades 5 through 8. The majority of teachers interviewed implement the DtWT program during English or language arts class. A few said it was taught during social studies, history, or reading. One teacher said it was discussed in health class in addition to English class, and another in after-school care. In most cases, teachers reported that they introduced the program to students by sharing information from the teacher's packet and explaining the criteria for the writing component. Another teacher said it was helpful to take a classroom poll to determine how many students had been affected by violence in order to spark classroom discussion. Several teachers said that they had invited a guest speaker to come into the school and talk to students about the program and the issue of youth violence. This either took place at an assembly or in the classroom and was reportedly a good way to highlight the program and capture students' attention.

Just over half of teachers said they had approximately 2 to 3 classroom discussions on the subject of youth violence prior to administering the writing component of the program. Most of the remaining teachers, however, said they spent anywhere from five to ten sessions (or class periods) talking about youth violence in the classroom. Two teachers specifically described their classroom discussions as brainstorming sessions about the topic of youth violence. A couple of teachers mentioned that the discussions were not limited to a finite number of sessions. They explained that the program was incorporated into their existing curricula. As one teacher put it:

> It is ongoing. I entwine it with the literature we're already reading. We're reading "The Outsiders," so we talk about why people join gangs, etc. Whatever they're reading at that time, I try to find a way to relate it to their own lives so they can open up about issues that involve them. So it's [implemented] all year.

Another teacher recalled, "I introduce the literature on the program, and sometimes I would integrate the program with the autobiography on Richard Wright called *Hunger.*" This was not surprising, as many other teachers conveyed that the program fit well with topics already being explored in class, such as character education and writing skills.

A small number of Chairs also confirmed that teachers within their community have integrated the DtWT program into their classroom curriculum, "...some of the teachers have literally added this project into their curriculum, some of it intermingles with Martin Luther King

Day or the celebration of African American history in February." In addition, a handful of Chairs also reported that they have integrated this program with the Safe and Drug Free Schools Program. The Web site for the Texas *Do the Write Thing* Challenge, described above, provides instruction on how DtWT can be integrated with Safe and Drug Free Schools. According to that web site:

> Your school may use this writing contest to comply with Title IV: Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities. By incorporating the discussions and consequential writings from *Do the Write Thing* Challenge into your school's prevention programs, you will be able to comply with a portion of Title IV, which is designed to support programs that prevent violence in and around schools, prevent the illegal use of tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs, and to involve more parents and community groups in school-based prevention programs.

Chairs reported that this Web site has been a useful tool for other DtWT localities throughout the country. They used the Web site to find lessons plans tailored to DtWT and information on how to integrate DtWT with the Safe and Drug Free Schools Program. One site now plans to use consultants paid for with Safe and Drug Free Schools money to implement the DtWT Challenge within classrooms for this upcoming school year and is hoping that this will alleviate some of the burden placed on teachers. They also anticipate that this strategy will help increase school participation with the DtWT program within their locality.

Writing Component

The writing component of the *Do the Write Thing* Program was described very similarly across teacher interviews. Nearly all teachers said they require all of their students to participate in the writing component of the program; however, students were not always required to submit their writings into the "contest." Some teachers mentioned that students were graded on the writings, as they would be for any other class assignment. The remaining minority of teachers did not grade the writings at all, and/or made the assignment voluntary altogether. Among the 20 National Finalists who were interviewed, 17 said that it was a mandatory requirement that they participate in the writing component of the program, although it was not clear whether or not they were also required to submit their writings to be judged at the local level.

Teachers provided several common responses when asked to describe what distinguished students who chose to submit[3] their writings directly to the Challenge from those who did not.

[3] It should be noted that there might have been some confusion around the definition of the word "submitted." Some teachers might have interpreted this question to mean whether or not a student turned in their writing as a

Teachers frequently reported that there was nothing that distinguished students who chose to submit their writings. However, slightly more than one quarter of teachers observed that students who typically receive high grades and are very motivated in school, students who are confident in their writing abilities, and students who have had a personal experience with violence were more likely to submit their writings. One teacher described some of these distinguishing factors as follows, "Students who are more interested in being successful writers submit the essays, these are the students that try harder in school, or the students who have a personal connection to a violent matter." Almost one half of National Finalists who were interviewed reported that they decided to submit their writings because of a personal experience with violence and/or because they wanted to express their own experiences with and ideas about violence.

Teacher and Chair data revealed some evidence that teachers do not always comply with DtWT regulations regarding the submission of student writings. One of the requirements outlined in the Operations Manual for the DtWT Challenge describes how "entries must be submitted in the form that they are received from the student writer" (p. 16). One Chair expressed concern that participating schools in that locality were neglecting to submit all student writings due to poor grammar or because the school deemed the content of the writings inappropriate.

Furthermore, when teachers were asked to distinguish between how many students received the classroom component of the *Do the Write Thing* program versus how many entries were submitted to the contest, it soon became clear that teachers approach the submission process in two ways. One group of teachers said they submit the writings of any student who wants her or his writing submitted. The second group of teachers reported that they collect a pool of writings from students who want theirs submitted to be judged and then hand select the writings from that pool that they believe are best.

One local community attempted to address this problem by having the local school liaison approach the schools to reinforce that they are not to censor student writings:

> We were discovering that maybe some of these teachers were holding out some of the writings that weren't maybe up to snuff. My school liaison has really done an incredible job...One of the things that she did was she convinced these teachers...that we're judging these writings not based on whether these kids spell everything right, or have every sentence right... Every one of them

classroom assignment, while other teachers might have interpreted the question to mean whether or not the student submitted their writing to the DTWT Challenge.

> doesn't have to be done on a computer and that they can be hand written and that's just fine, but we want them to submit [writings from] all the kids that participate... So we've got these teachers doing a lot more to let these kids go ahead and express what they feel and go ahead and submit all of them.

Other local Chairs who may be concerned that they are not receiving all entries written by students might consider using a similar strategy.

4.4 Judging Student Submissions

Chairs reported selecting people with a wide range of backgrounds and experiences to judge student writings submitted to the DtWT Challenge. The range of individuals and organizations selected to judge writings included the following: businesses, community organizations, Police Athletic Leagues, Fire Departments, Rotary Clubs, people from the media, attorneys, judges, law enforcement, professional athletes and other celebrities, and local university or college students. Attorneys and other law firm staff were the most frequently reported type of judge.

The majority of Chairs reported that student entries are rated using the criteria provided by the National Program. According to the Operations Manual for the *Do the Write Thing* Program, "entries are judged on the basis of content, originality, and responsiveness to the three questions: How has youth violence affected my life? What are the causes of youth violence? What can I do about youth violence?" The Operations Manual also states that, "Grammar and spelling will not be used as criteria for judging entries." Most Chairs also reported using the evaluation form that is provided in the appendix of the Operations Manual as a template for judging writings. This template uses a one hundred point scale in which a total of 50 points may be awarded for content, 30 points are awarded for originality, and 20 points are awarded for question responsiveness.

Two Chairs reported that there is no specific criteria used to rate the student writings, rather judges use a ten point scale to grade writings using their own personal criteria, which potentially could vary considerably across judges and localities.

4.5 Local Award Ceremonies

Chairs were also asked to describe the various tasks that are involved with preparing for the local award ceremony. There was much similarity in terms of the reported tasks that are involved with the coordination of the local award ceremony. Overall, Chairs frequently reported that the primary tasks required to coordinate and prepare for the local award ceremony include:

sending invitations to parents, teachers, students, guest speakers; securing a location and refreshments for the event; acquiring awards for both teachers and students; securing a photographer; writing thank you letters; as well as publishing copies of the booklet of winning student writings for distribution to people of influence within the community. Local award ceremonies have been held at various location such as: colleges, a city hall, a disposal system wildlife range, hotel banquet rooms, governor's mansions, restaurants, libraries, an embassy, as well as law offices. Chairs also reported presenting a range of awards for students and teachers at the local award ceremonies such as: trophies, certificates, gift bags, cash awards, plaques, saving bonds, booklet of writings, gift certificates, t-shirts, letters of congratulation, as well as tickets to sporting events within the community. One Chair reported that they have simplified the coordination for the event by preparing a checklist of items to ensure that all tasks are completed on time.

Preparing a checklist of tasks to be completed is an efficient way of tracking the coordination of the local award ceremony. The Operations Manual does provide a list of some of the tasks involved with the event such as: inviting the governor, inviting a local sports figure, providing students with gifts, inviting National Finalists to read their winning entries, securing a photographer, as well as formulating letters of congratulation for winning students. The list supplied in the Manual is useful for providing general guidelines for the coordination of the event, although Chairs who are new to the program might benefit from using a checklist that outlines a more detailed timeline of tasks to be completed.

4.6 Summary and Discussion

Chairs described using a variety of strategies to recruit schools. The majority of Chairs reported obtaining the support from the superintendent of schools, who in turn contacts schools either directly over the phone, or indirectly using letters. Some Chairs reported that they successfully recruited schools by making presentations to superintendents, teachers, and principals in order to streamline their recruitment process. This could be a strategy useful for Chairs who are having problems with recruitment. These presentations could be used to directly convey an overview and history of the program as well as program requirements. In addition, Chairs can emphasize how the DtWT Challenge can be easily integrated into various classroom curricula, can be used with after school programming, and can even fit nicely into the framework of the Safe and Drug Free Schools Grant. Chairs might also consider hiring outside consultants to teach the classroom discussion component of the DtWT program. This strategy might alleviate some of the burden the program might place on teachers, and may also help to increase school participation and buy-in for the program. In addition, since DtWT is often implemented during the month of February when high stakes tests are typically taken in various states throughout the country, hiring outside consultants might ease some of the pressure placed on

teachers during this busy time of year. DtWT localities should also be encouraged to solicit program support from high-level civic, business, and religious leaders within a community by placing them on an executive committee, which may help increase support and buy-in for the program.

Another recommendation would be to encourage Chairs to make presentations at schools in order to provide more extensive training on DtWT, since a small proportion of teachers reported that they thought they would benefit from more extensive training on the program. These presentations would give Chairs an opportunity to stress the rules and regulations for the Challenge, such as submitting all student writings regardless of grammar, spelling, or content. Also, program training and information dissemination could be improved by enhancing the National Program Web site for DtWT in order to facilitate cross-school and cross-locality sharing. The Web site set up by the Texas DtWT Challenge could be used as a model for adapting the National Program Web site. The National Program Web site could store information such as the Operations Manual and Teacher's Packet, information on recruitment strategies, fundraising tips, and could also provide a forum for which Chairs, school liaisons, teachers, and other individuals involved with DtWT could exchange information on best practices and lessons learned.

Teachers frequently reported that they require students to participate in the writing component of DtWT, but that they do not require students to submit their entries into the Challenge. A small proportion of teachers reported that they do require their students to submit entries into the Challenge. The national office and local program Chairs may need to reinforce to DtWT teachers that one of the central tenets of the program is that students are making a personal commitment against youth violence by submitting their writings into the Challenge. Students who choose not to make a personal commitment against youth violence should not be encouraged to submit their writings, and therefore the writings should only be entered into the Challenge on a voluntary basis.

A majority of Chairs reported using the rating system provided as an appendix in the Operations Manuals for the program. A few Chairs reported that their grading system was much less formalized. To ensure consistency, the national office may want to stress or reinforce the requirement that all student entries be judged using the same criteria provided in the Operations Manual.

Information exchange between Chairs is one way to improve the efficiency and operation of the *Do the Write Thing* Program. Newer Chairs can solicit the advice and expertise of more experienced Chairs to provide guidance that would assuage some of the stress associated with getting a new program off the ground. For example, Chairs could exchange information

regarding ways to prepare for the local award ceremony. One Chair reported using a checklist and timeline of tasks involved with the local award ceremony preparations. This checklist could be distributed to Chairs throughout the country to assist them with preparing for their own local events. This checklist would serve solely as a guide, and Chairs would be able to modify the checklist to meet the needs of their own community.

5. RESEARCH QUESTION #2: WHAT IMPACT HAS *DO THE WRITE THING* HAD ON STUDENT PARTICIPANTS?

A main purpose of this evaluation was to explore the question *What impact has* DtWT *had on student participants?* In this section, the strongest themes borne out of interview data regarding how students experience and benefit from the DtWT Challenge are discussed.[4] In the pages that follow, National Finalists explain in their own voice how the DtWT program has made a difference in their lives in terms of, among other things, self-esteem, pride, and self-efficacy; increased awareness of the problem of youth violence; and, in some cases, once-in-a-lifetime travel opportunities. Data from classroom teachers and local program Chairs largely confirm these program impacts and offer additional insight into potential program benefits for non-winning DtWT participants. Findings related to program goals and objectives concerning youth involvement in creating solutions to violence are presented in this section as well.

5.1 Self-esteem, Pride, and Self-efficacy

National Finalists cited several positive impacts of participation in the DtWT Challenge, talking about both internal changes (e.g., changes in how they feel about themselves, awareness) and external or material benefits of program participation (e.g., opportunity to travel and experience new things). The most common impact reported by National Finalists was an increase in feelings of self-worth and self-esteem, with a majority of students interviewed (16/20) agreeing that becoming a national finalist had made them feel better about themselves. While some students were only able to articulate it in the simple terms of "It felt good" or "It made me feel smart," over one-third of students (7) talked more specifically about the sense of pride they felt at having been successful in the DtWT Challenge. Although Jimmy (7th grade) lives in a very poor Latino area plagued by crime and violence, he has a very positive outlook on life. In his warm and friendly manner, he explained what participation in the program meant to him:

[4] Student data from National Finalists are highlighted in this section. It is important for the reader to keep in mind that the experiences of National Finalists are not likely to be representative of the entire population of students who participate in the classroom and writing components of the DtWT challenge. It is expected that National Finalists, and to an extent semi-finalists, extract the greatest benefit from DtWT participation.

> Proud! It makes me feel proud, because I never got to do nothing like this before, and so it makes me feel proud of myself... I didn't really have nothing to be proud of before this.

Others like Shauna, a 7th grade girl from the South with a tough façade and lots of attitude, felt similarly:

> It makes me proud... It made me feel like I was part of doing something and that I can help stop violence. And even if it doesn't stop, I know I tried and I did the right thing.

Shauna's words begin to reveal how some National Finalists not only felt proud but also enjoyed a greater sense of self-efficacy—feelings that they could do things well in general and, more specifically, that they could make a difference regarding youth violence. Just over one-third of students interviewed (7) explained how their confidence had grown since "winning" the DtWT contest.[5] When asked how the DtWT Challenge had affected his life, Michael, an 8th grade boy with a charming demeanor and soft southern accent, embraced his newfound confidence:

> It really did make me feel special...just being recognized for being successful. [It makes me feel like] I'm on top of my game and am one of the leaders of tomorrow. And it helped me to get even more confident and to be even more huge. It helped my confidence boosted up to be colossal! And I think that I can do anything that I put my mind to. So this program, it really did help me.

Domingo, an 8th grader with an athletic frame explained how he was successful at sports but not academics. In fact, Domingo had difficulty comprehending the vocabulary in some of the interview questions he was asked. He explained the significance program participation had to him:

> [It made me feel] good, especially being the first one in my middle school to be the finalist, because no one else except me has ever [been named DtWT finalist] since the school has been there... It made me think that I can do something—that I can *really* do something, instead of trying and knowing that I'm not going to do it right. [I have] more confidence!

Nearly a quarter (8/35) of teachers interviewed said they had observed increases in self-esteem and confidence in their students as a result of DtWT. Importantly, those teachers felt this program effect applied not only to National Finalists but those recognized at local ceremonies as

[5] The national DtWT office does think of or promote the DtWT Challenge as a contest nor refer to students as "winning" the Challenge. However, that is how students (and many teachers) consistently think and talk about it.

well. While this widens the scope of benefit considerably beyond the sample of National Finalist, teachers did not observe that the program had the same impact on students who only submitted a writing or participated in classroom discussions.

5.2 Positive Attention, Recognition, and Parental Involvement

Related and perhaps contributing to increases in self-esteem and self-efficacy, another important program impact reported by National Finalists, teachers, and local Chairs alike was the positive attention that students received for their efforts. Seven teachers specifically mentioned that just being recognized (whether by important people in the community or simply by their parents) and receiving an award for something they had done was very meaningful to students. This is especially true because many had never before received accolades for their performance in school, nor, in some cases, for anything else. According to one teacher, "Some of these kids have never received an award. The free meal at the local award ceremony is a positive impact for the kids." This sentiment was echoed in interviews with local Chairs, many of whom had the impression that DtWT finalists (both local and national) typically had received little or no recognition for their achievements in the past.

Indeed, National Finalists took note of the recognition thrust up on them as a result of their success in DtWT. Nearly three-fourths of students interviewed (14/20) reported that they received positive attention from parents, teachers, friends, community members, and even the media as a result of their success with the DtWT program. For some, it was the first time they had received recognition for an academic success. In fact, a handful National Finalists interviewed explained that when they were called to the principal's office or approached by the teacher, they thought they were in trouble. Nearly all said they were "shocked" when they were instead congratulated for being chosen as a National Finalist. Jerome, a friendly and talkative 8th grade boy with prominent scars on his face and hands, explained it this way, "Well, I finally did something right. I'm not saying that I'm a bad kid, but I get into trouble a lot."

Shauna, the young woman introduced previously, had shown little interest in actively participating in her interview while in DC for the National Finalist recognition ceremony. In fact, she seemed bored to death and was clearly annoyed when pulled away from the group of boys with whom she was flirting in order to participate in the interview. But when asked about the impact that being selected as a National Finalist had on her life, her smile broadened and she let down her guard a bit to explain:

> I was going to class, and the teacher said, 'I want to talk to you.' And I was like, Oh no! I am in trouble again. But she said 'No, you are not in trouble—you won the contest!' She told me before

> class and then made an announcement about it. I felt like I was on top of the world, because I love attention.

Shauna went on to reveal that she particularly was impacted by the special attention that she received from her family. Although Shauna confessed, "I can be smart when I want to be," she said she had never before been recognized for anything she had done related to her schoolwork. Things changed for her when she became a National Finalist. Her family took notice. They made a big deal out of her achievement at her family reunion earlier in the summer, and Shauna beamed as she described her parents' reaction to her success: "My dad—he is real excited and proud. And especially my mother, she was real proud. She wanted to come [to DC], but she couldn't because of moving and having the baby." Although Shauna's mother could not attend the recognition ceremony in Washington, DC, Shauna explained that she and her mom got to spend time alone when they went shopping at Wal-Mart in preparation for the trip. Though it may sound like a little thing, in Shauna's life, with many siblings under the age of 12, it was clearly a big deal to have captured her mother's sole focus of attention for one afternoon of shopping—especially for this special occasion.

A small number of the Chairs interviewed believe that DtWT helps to increase parental involvement in the lives of student finalists much in the way that Shauna described, and nearly half (8/20) of National Finalists reported that the increase in attention they received from parents was a meaningful result of the program.

5.3 Greater Awareness of the Problem of Youth Violence

Youth violence is a serious and widespread problem, and data were presented above describing what DtWT Chairs and teachers across localities saw as the problem of violence in their communities. Increasing awareness and recognition of the problem of youth violence is an important first step in successfully addressing it through programs and policy. Importantly, then, the interview participants in this study described a substantial increase in student awareness of the problem of youth violence as a significant impact of *Do the Write Thing*.

Approximately half of teachers interviewed felt that DtWT helped students gain newfound awareness of the issue of violence in our society. This awareness was mainly categorized by teachers in three ways: an awareness of the many different forms violence can take; an understanding that violence exists and is prevalent; and an appreciation that individuals have the choice to partake in violence or to help eradicate it. For example, one teacher explained that when she and her class discussed the definition of violence, many students thought of violence strictly on a large scale—terrorism, for example. After implementing the classroom component of DtWT, however, students began to realize that violence comes in many forms, and soon they saw bullying as a form of violence.

Teachers explained that as students started to recognize class- and schoolroom bullying as acts of violence, they became aware that they themselves could be agents of change in addressing and perhaps preventing youth violence. One teacher illustrated this point by relaying a story about a particular girl in her class who previously had been confrontational and quick to get involved in arguments. After the classroom component of DtWT had been implemented, the teacher observed a dramatic change in the girl's attitude—she became something of a peacemaker in the classroom. She stopped fights between other students and pulled them aside to talk to them about alternative ways to solve problems. The girl told her teacher that she had changed because she realized that "violence begins with her." Another teacher explained her belief that the program enhanced student awareness. According to her, students became aware that "this [violence] was not necessarily an outside force that they fell victim to… and that [violence] was something they could actually control a great deal, whether by the choices they made…or by being proactive."

The idea that DtWT creates greater awareness of the issue of youth violence was reinforced during interviews with Chairs, many of whom had observed how student awareness of youth violence increases as a result of dialoguing with other students and their teachers about the issue. As one Chair remarked:

> [DtWT] provides students with an opportunity to talk about pressing issues in the community and violence. And one of the real values…when you read the essays of the young people, you see that they are thinking and that they do understand the impact of violence—the devastation that it reeks on their lives and their families and their communities.

In fact, a majority of Chairs contend that the peer-to-peer learning opportunities that the DtWT Challenge provides help youth realize that they are not alone in their experiences with youth violence and that this is an important program impact in and of itself:

> So again, I think what effect it's had is that it raises their awareness. It probably gives them a sense that they're not alone in whatever violence they might have experienced in their lives, or that they're not alone in trying to find solutions for it and trying to figure out why it happens or continues to happen.

Students, too, felt strongly that DtWT had raised their awareness about the problem of violence in society. This, in fact, was one of the strongest themes to emerge from the student data, with three-fourths responding that consciousness-raising was one of the largest effects of the DtWT program on their lives. Of the 15 students who felt this way, 14 said they became aware that violence was a bigger problem in society than they had previously thought. After

reading other students' DtWT submissions, National Finalists said they learned that violence was widespread and affected greater numbers of people on a daily basis than they previously had realized.

For students who do not live in homes or communities with violence, this realization came as a surprise and helped build concern and empathy. It even caused some students like Sarah, an 8th grade student from a suburban community on the East Coast, to reflect on how fortunate and safe they felt:

> Well, it has made me a little more aware of it, because I really had to think—because I really don't see violence every day as some other people probably do. And it made me realize how blessed I am not to live in a major violence-filled [place]—like, my parents aren't violent, you know? [DtWT] really opened my eyes.

For students who personally witness or experience violence on a more frequent basis, this awareness helped them see that, as Chairs and teachers predicted, other students experience violence in their lives. Several students shared their experiences of realizing that they are not alone:

> [I learned] that I wasn't as singled out as I thought I was—that youth violence was on a wider scale than I ever thought... At the local dinner, I looked through the book and read a lot of essays, and now here [in DC] I haven't gotten a chance to read them yet, but I will. And like, I thought that not so many kids were actually in my shoes and that not as many people experience what I had, but when I read the essays, I can relate to them and know exactly what they mean.

> It showed me that I'm not the worst off, but I'm not the best off. I'm kind of in-between... I heard in people's essays that they made that some bad things really happened.

> I learned that it affected more people than me. I thought it was only about me, and now I know that it's about other people. Other people are going through the same thing, and they're trying to fight it, and they're helping.

Furthermore, much as teachers had described, this awareness led some students to think about the potential role they could play in helping to curb youth violence. Although this number was small, three of the National Finalists interviewed talked about their realization that they could be agents of change. One boy declared, "I think that this program is very good at helping children understand that we should do something about youth violence." One of his female counterparts

expressed it this way: "Well, it's opened my eyes to other people, and it tells me that I have to do something for the world."

It led other students, like Domingo, to rethink his own violent tendencies and behaviors:

> My attitude changed a little bit from the student stories I've heard —changed what I think about doing. When I read it, there was a thought in my head… and what I was planning on doing, I decided to not think about doing it anymore.

As could be expected, a small number of students did not feel that the DtWT program had much of an impact on them. Jacob, a candid and seemingly well-educated young man from the West Coast, was particularly unimpressed with the program and felt he had learned nothing through his participation in the DtWT Challenge:

> I'm going to be honest, you know? No 13-year-old is going to care so much about violence that they're going to start helping people in poor neighborhoods or anything. [DtWT] is not going to do anything—they have to, like, not be so naïve:

While this particular student was unmoved by his experience, the others interviewed were not. Almost to a person, that majority of other students said that reading the essays of their fellow students and catching a glimpse into their worlds was highly efficacious—more so than the classroom component and the speeches and "lectures" at local and national award ceremonies.

5.4 Opportunity

A third major impact of the DtWT program on student participants was identified by interview respondents from each of the three groups. National Finalists, local Chairs, and teachers agreed that the opportunity afforded to students to travel to local and national recognition ceremonies was an important and potentially life-changing program benefit for some students. As mentioned, Chairs and teachers observed that these opportunities had the potential to increase parental involvement as well as student self-esteem and self-efficacy. However, the material benefits of these opportunities struck study participants as important as well.

Travel to Local and National Award Ceremonies

Local DtWT Chairs frequently described how student finalists who attended either local or national award ceremonies were positively affected by the opportunity to travel to these events. In fact, when asked to name the most important benefits of the DtWT program on students, many Chairs responded in a similar manner to the following:

> The biggest thing is the opportunity to have a trip to DC. For many of these young people, they probably would never get there. So, the opportunity to go to Washington, to see the capitol, to go the Library of Congress, to be in a room where there are Representatives or Senators who come to the national celebration and to be in the room with those kinds of people—[these kids] are rarely afforded those opportunities.

Other Chairs drew from feedback that they had received over the years from parents to describe the meaning that students and their families placed on the opportunity to travel to DtWT recognition ceremonies. For example:

> One mother said to me, 'My child has never been to anything like a hotel or been to a dinner.' Another parent said, 'My child has never been on an airplane and would never have had an opportunity to come to Washington, DC.'

One Chair shared that she has been convinced of the worth of the program based on feedback such as this from a National Finalist in her community:

> The student told me, 'Thank you for allowing me to go to Washington, DC and [the State capital]. You'll never know what that has meant to me.' If the trip doesn't help anybody else, it has changed her life forever. So as far as I'm concerned, the program has worked.

Twenty percent of teachers thought that traveling to award ceremonies had a big impact on the lives of students. Like the program Chairs who were interviewed, many of these teachers thought that traveling was something these students never could have enjoyed without the program due to their parents' financial situations. Teachers frequently stated that many of their student finalists had never been outside of their community, let alone their state, before traveling to the local or national ceremonies. Consequently, many of these teachers labeled this as a "huge opportunity."

Student data, too, reflected the importance of traveling to local and national award ceremonies. Three-fourths of National Finalist (15/20) discussed the opportunity to be in Washington, DC as one of the greatest impacts of program participation. Though students did not necessarily state it directly in these terms, the chance to travel to a new place such as the nation's capital expanded their sense of the world and of how other people live. In their own words, many of these students marveled at how it was their first time to leave their state, the first time to fly, or their first time to stay in a fancy hotel. Jerome summed it up this way:

> Shoot, it gave me a vacation! If you live at my home, well, you need a vacation... Plus, I've never been on an airplane before, so it's something new. It was interesting—I liked the take-off. I liked it when you're first speeding up to lift off—I ain't never gone that fast! And probably staying at this fancy hotel, even though it's probably for rich people. I need to get some money before I come back here!

Eleven of these 15 young people believed that they might never have gotten a chance to see the nation's capital were it not for the DtWT program. These students echoed sentiments expressed by Michael:

> Well, where I'm from, a kid like me wouldn't even be looking at Washington, DC...It'd probably be like a one out of a million chance if I didn't enter this program that I would come to DC.

Meeting Other Students

Teachers and Chairs observed that, in addition to simply benefiting from a new life experience, such as experiencing the culture and history of Washington, DC, traveling to award ceremonies allowed students the opportunity to make friends and meet new people—to enhance socialization skills and further facilitate peer-to-peer learning opportunities. One Chair commented, "For many of our kids, this is the only way they were able to interact with so many different kids nationally. They'd met people from other states, and national exposure for these kids was of paramount importance." Another Chair reported that *Do the Write Thing* allows finalists the opportunity to meet students who are coping with similar issues related to violence: "When they go to Washington to meet all the young people from all across the country who are struggling with the same kinds of issues that they are—and to get to meet and to know them—I think some of them develop relationships that last longer than the three days that they are in DC."

Only a very small number of teachers interviewed named this as an important program benefit. However, those who did said it was important because students were able to hear about problems in other parts of the United States. This further facilitated the awareness that students said was important to them. Nearly one-third of National Finalists agreed that networking and meeting other students was meaningful to them and that it facilitated the peer-to-peer learning that helped them better understand the problem of violence.

Other Opportunities

A few interview respondents noted other opportunities that students were afforded through the DtWT Program. Although these were not themes across a majority of respondents, they do seem important and relevant to mention. For instance, 20 percent of National Finalists interviewed believed that winning the DtWT Challenge would look good on future applications and could help them get into private prep schools and college. One teacher agreed that DtWT could give students an extra advantage in that way:

> In [our community], no kid wants to go to the home school...because it's recognizably poor. So, they have to apply to magnet schools if they don't want to go there. So having this on their resume or portfolio definitely gives them an advantage... it's something that they can use as a power tool.

A handful of Chairs also cited instances in which students were afforded the opportunity to attend schools with better facilities and reputations. One Chair shared a story about a student who came from a very poor and drug infested area. This student was mentored by his DtWT teacher, which helped the student become admitted into a school that offered art classes and more advanced English studies. A second Chair shared how a student was able to attend a better school as a result of participation in DtWT and a DtWT spinoff program:

> [We had] one kid who was trying to get into Science High School, as an example...He just missed getting into the school and was on the waiting list, but in all likelihood wasn't going to make the cut. And then, after his exposure with our program and the teachers and the staff of DtWT, they called in some markers. This kid is now going to Science High School this year in the fall.

In addition, some Chairs also reported instances where the DtWT program in their communities had helped to identify students who were in need of intervention or who may have been "crying out for help" in the writings they submitted to the DtWT Challenge. As one Chair explained:

> Unfortunately, we had a student this year who, in two pages typed and single-spaced, wrote about wanting to kill his sister...[It was] a very emotionally charged essay, a very angry essay. Any hopefully he never ever would have done anything, but I'm glad that we gave him the opportunity to get that out. And it was brought to somebody's attention who went to the school, and they were able to do something to help him.

While examples like these were relatively infrequent across the interview sample, they reflect the potential of the DtWT to have a profound effect on a small number of students who are involved with the program.

5.5 Personal Commitment to Nonviolence and Student Activism

According to the Operations Manual, two primary objectives for the DtWT Challenge are:

- To motivate students in middle schools to make a personal written commitment to not engage in violent acts
- To motivate students in middle schools to do something positive to reduce youth violence in their community.

In order to gauge the extent to which DtWT was successful in meeting those objectives, students were asked a number of related questions. Just five students said they had a made a personal commitment to nonviolence as a result of DtWT.[6] Six students reported that DtWT reinforced prior feelings about not wanting to be involved in violence, bullying, or gangs. Seven students said they had not made such a commitment as a result of their involvement in DtWT and believe it was unrealistic to do so, especially in situations where they might need to defend themselves.

Students also were asked whether they had done something positive in their community to reduce or prevent youth violence as a result of DtWT. Without exception, National Finalists reported that they had not taken any action in that direction. Half of them said they were not aware of any youth violence prevention programs or activities that they could join in their communities. When asked if they planned to be involved in violence prevention efforts in the future as a result of what they learned through the DtWT program, just under half of students (9) felt they would like to try.

5.6 Summary and Discussion

The main outcomes of the DtWT program reported by a majority of Student Finalists who were interviewed were: increased feelings of self-esteem, pride, and self-efficacy; opportunities to travel and learn from other students; and a greater awareness of the problem of youth violence in society. Although the first two program effects were perhaps realized solely by local and national finalists, it is more likely that awareness was raised on a more general level among all students who participated in the DtWT Challenge.

[6] It should be noted that many students write about the commitment they have made to nonviolence in the essays they submit to the *Do the Write Thing* Challenge.

National Finalists consistently remarked about the importance of reading other students' DtWT essay submissions. However, it is not clear that the majority of students who participate in DtWT across the country have as much access to these writings. For example, students who do not go to local or national award ceremonies might not have access to writings from the broad spectrum of students across the country. In order to more effectively raise awareness and motivation among a greater number of students, it may be helpful for the national DtWT office to emphasize to teachers the importance and efficacy of sharing as many student writings with their class as possible. Perhaps the national DtWT office could supply teachers with a packet of previously written essays from prior years (and update that packet on an annual basis) so that teachers could more easily incorporate those into their classroom and make them more readily available to their students.

Overall, the National Finalists in our sample did not report particularly high levels of commitment to nonviolence as a result of their participation in the DtWT Challenge. Because teachers often mandate that students participate in the writing component of the DtWT Challenge, DtWT directors and staff cannot assume that the number of submissions received each year equates squarely to the number of students who have made such a commitment. One suggestion to foster increased student commitment might be to add another question to the DtWT writing component. For example, the assignment could ask the youth to respond to the question *How can youth make a commitment to nonviolence and what would this look like?* or *How do you intend to make a commitment to nonviolence in your life?* As they discuss these or similar questions in the classroom, teachers should be advised to direct students to violence prevention programs or efforts in their local communities and to explore the ways that students could volunteer and contribute to these efforts.

Although there were low levels of reported commitment to nonviolence and activism around trying to prevent or reduce youth violence among students interviewed, there was some evidence to suggest that success in the DtWT program can motivate students to perform better in their lives and to have the confidence to continue to try to do so. Though these impacts are much more likely to be felt by a small minority of DtWT entrants (i.e., National Finalists and perhaps local finalists), the effect on their lives has the potential to be very meaningful. Again, a majority of students interviewed described increases in self-esteem, pride, and self-efficacy that stemmed from success, positive recognition, and increased parental involvement. As the literature suggests, these are protective factors. Success breeds self-efficacy and the desire to keep performing at a high level. This, in turn, can motivate kids to engage in positive and productive activities and to stay away from gangs and youth violence. As one DtWT teacher explained it, "Once they feel special that *one time*, they want it again and again…That's human nature."

6. RESEARCH QUESTION #3: WHAT IMPACT HAS *DO THE WRITE THING* HAD ON SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES?

A third focus of this evaluation was to explore salient outcomes of DtWT implementation on schools and communities. Teachers, local Chairs, and students were asked to talk both generally and specifically about their perceptions of how schools and communities had changed as a result of local DtWT programming. In this section, program findings related to community and teacher awareness, classroom climate, integration of student ideas into policy and practice, and DtWT program offshoots are presented and discussed. Generally, interview respondents had more difficulty providing examples of how schools and communities were impacted by DtWT than they did talking about how the DtWT program had affected change at the student level.

6.1 Community and School Awareness, Pride

According to a large majority of teachers and local program Chairs in our sample, the *Do the Write Thing* program has had a positive impact on schools and communities. To a large extent, however, teachers and Chairs were only able to speak about this impact in general terms, such as an increase in community and school awareness and pride. For example, teachers talked about how the DtWT program raised the level of awareness of youth violence among students, teachers, and the community. About one fourth of Chairs agreed that the program successfully increased the level of awareness among adults within schools and communities. According to these Chair accounts, many adults who read students' emotionally charged writings became not only more mindful of the problem of youth violence within their community but were inspired to take ownership of the problem and to try to find solutions. As one Chair described:

> Involving the community in realizing that it's our very own youth in our very own community who are experiencing violence first-hand, [it becomes clear that] it's not someone else's problem.

A couple of Chairs also theorized that the booklet of winning submissions distributed to people of influence within local communities helps to raise the awareness of decision makers, which may eventually influence school and community policy. However, they did not have concrete examples that this had yet taken place within their localities.

Some teachers spoke about a general feeling of pride that students, schools, and communities experienced after having a winning student go to Washington, DC. For instance, the publicity that a few schools received bolstered their credibility and reputations and was a source of pride for students and schools. A Title I school teacher remarked, "this [publicity around a winning student] will help show that our students can perform."

6.2 Teacher Awareness and Views Concerning Youth Violence

Over half of teachers interviewed confirmed that after dialoguing with their students about the issue of youth violence and its prevalence, their own views and awareness of the problem did change. It was common to hear teachers say that they knew students were exposed to violence, but that they underestimated the degree of that exposure. In the words of one teacher, "the depth and the different types of violence that they have to face everyday is more widespread than I would have thought...They take it as part of life; they don't see that it's not supposed to be there." Another teacher responded:

> I see that they have some baggage when they come to the school and that some are really personally touched by violence. They'll [talk] about an older brother who died...or a father who's in prison. That has come up twice [in the DtWT essays].

Just over one third of teachers interviewed responded that the biggest benefit of the program for them was this increase in personal awareness about the issue of youth violence and how this translated into the ability to better understand and work with kids who are dealing with problems of violence in their lives. Nearly 20 percent of teachers interviewed felt that DtWT has allowed them to get to know their students better. Two teachers remarked that they had no idea their students went through this kind of "hell." Some said it was very beneficial for them to understand what kids are faced with when they step outside of the classroom. As one teacher explained:

> [*Do the Write Thing*] gets children writing, enables the teacher to find out more about students. I had a few children who were harboring some terrible stories...and I had not a clue. [This program] allows the teachers a little insight into the children...and you get more of an understanding of what some, not all, of the children are going through.

About 25 percent of teachers interviewed said that their personal views and awareness about violence had not changed after implementing the DtWT program. Specifically, these teachers were not surprised to learn about students' experience with violence. They said they knew the issue of violence in the school and community presented a challenging way of life for many students. When asked if her views of violence had changed, another teacher replied, "I'd like to say yes, but no, because I've been doing this so long that nothing surprises me."

6.3 Strengthening Student-teacher Relationships and Improving Classroom Climate

Some of the interview respondents in this study believed that the increases in student and teacher awareness of the problem of youth violence translated into stronger student-teacher relationships and, in some cases, improved classroom climate.

Teachers and students were asked if their relationship with one another had improved as a result of engaging in open discussion about the emotional and difficult subject of youth violence. Just under 70 percent of teachers believed that their relationships with students had improved as a result of DtWT. Regarding her improved relationship with students and how that improved her teaching ability, one teacher said, "Yes, if you understand the child, then you're not just seeing them as a number anymore. You're seeing them as a human being, which teachers sometimes forget to do when they teach a hundred and fifty a day." An additional fifteen percent of teachers expressed that they thought the program had the potential to build better relationships between students and teachers but that this was often "dependent on the teacher and the student" or on other factors such as whether the teacher had time to implement the program correctly.

Approximately half (9) of the National Finalists interviewed agreed that DtWT had allowed them to form a stronger bond and better relationship with their teacher. They suggested, for instance, that they started to see their teachers as "more human" or as "real people." An additional one-third of students interviewed felt they already enjoyed a good relationship with their teacher, but that the program may have strengthened it.

Seventy-five percent of students and a roughly equal percentage of teachers reported that, despite improvements in their relationships with one another, they did not see any positive changes in the classroom or school atmosphere as a result of DtWT. Those who did observe such changes (approximately 25 percent of both the students and teachers who were interviewed) talked about a positive change in classroom climate in terms of increased empathy and understanding among students and, sometimes, less fighting and bullying. Teachers in this group also described the change in terms of improved student attitudes, a better sense of self, and the desire and willingness to work harder. For example, more students expressed interest in participating in the program the following year. The teachers felt that the incentives of the program created something for them to work toward. As one teacher remarked, "Just the fact that somebody from this little community was chosen to go to the nation's capital because of a paper they wrote, it inspired the others. Every student this past year was determined to go to Washington." Other teachers agreed that the program encouraged improvement in writing skills. Specifically, two of those teachers felt that the writing was good practice for the standardized state tests that students take annually.

Approximately 15 percent of teachers believed that classroom climate changed because their students had the opportunity to open up about their feelings about the issue of violence and how it affects their family, friends, and themselves. These teachers observed that once students were given freedom to express pent up anger, frustrations, or even fears in a constructive way, they were easier to teach. One teacher described it this way:

> It's much easier to teach if students are—especially in the middle school—if they are able to express themselves. That's half of the battle, because if you can't reach them, you can't teach them. And you never know what's going on if you don't allow them. And so you have to be free to talk to them, because they come in with a lot of issues, they come in with a lot of baggage. It just makes it easier to teach when they realize that [they] don't have to be violent.

Only one teacher saw the program as a detriment to her teaching experience instead of a benefit. She reported that the timing of the program conflicted with required state exams. She also complained that implementing the program was time consuming and that other core teachers, not just Language Arts and English teachers, should share the burden of implementing the DtWT program at her school.

6.4 Integration of Student Ideas and Program Offshoots

Another way to assess the potential impact of the DtWT program is to look at how often and/or how successfully student ideas have been integrated into either school or community policy. As well, the presence of program offshoots is an indicator of community and school outcomes related to the implementation of DtWT. In the paragraphs that follow, data relevant to these indicators are presented. Interviews across respondents gleaned little evidence to suggest that DtWT has affected schools and communities in this manner.

Integration of Student Ideas

When asked, the majority of teachers, students, and local Chairs reported that they were not aware of any instances in which ideas from students' written entries were integrated into either school or community policy. Eighteen of the 20 National Finalists in our sample reported that the content of their winning essays had not translated into school or community policy.

Just a small proportion of Chairs and teachers shared examples of the efforts their communities made to integrate student ideas on a larger level. For instance, one local Chair reported that two finalists were placed on a community commission and were given the opportunity to express ideas from their DtWT submissions in that forum:

> Two finalists were placed on our Crime Commission with all the adults and community leaders to help them try to make the schools safer…The Crime Commission used the students' ideas to implement in the schools. I can't give you specific examples, but that's why we hook the students up with them. Because the superintendents are on the Crime Commission, and it helps them pinpoint the problems in the schools and be able to come up with solutions.

Another Chair reported that students' ideas directly impacted the creation of a mentoring program within their community: "The kids would say to us, 'If I only had somebody to talk to besides my parents, because my parents just don't understand me'." This Chair was familiar with scientifically proven mentoring programs and described how students' ideas in their writings opened his eyes to the fact that there was a real need for more mentoring programs within their community.

A couple of Chairs reported that since people of influence within their community receive the booklet of finalists' writings, this might in turn indirectly impact community and school policy. However, they offered no supporting evidence that this had taken place in their communities.

A small number of the teachers in our interview sample reported that schools had used some suggestions from student DtWT entries to create or reinforce school policy in the following areas:

- Zero tolerance for profanity
- Free/reduced breakfast served in a closed classroom instead of the cafeteria (because other kids were making fun of those who received the breakfast)
- No bullying policy
- Dress code
- Friendship chains (taking turns saying something nice about another person).

One teacher also mentioned that some members of student government were influenced by their participation in *Do the Write Thing* and have future plans to integrate students' ideas into school rules. A handful of teachers believed that their schools have *future* plans to use ideas in students' DtWT writings to influence policy.

Concern about the infrequent practice of integrating student ideas into policy was expressed by a few Chairs. One insisted that there needed to be more community follow-up with the ideas expressed in DtWT student entries:

> Unfortunately, in my opinion, they write very good essays with good ideas about things, but they're not being followed up on by the local communities. So the piece that's missing is: how do we take what these young people have said and empower them? Because they talk about what they can do as individual students—so how do you empower them to them go and do what they talk about and what they believe are things that could help in their schools and in their communities? That's where I think we haven't made the connection yet.

Program Offshoots

Teachers and Chairs also were asked about their knowledge of any program offshoots or outgrowths of the *Do the Write Thing* program in their community. Both groups of interviewees were largely unaware of any direct offshoots of the program in their local schools or communities.

Nonetheless, the few DtWT program offshoots that teachers and Chairs were aware of are worthy of mention. One teacher reported that two of his students started a tutoring program in their community. This idea was an outgrowth of what the students had learned from participating in the *Do the Write Thing* Challenge in seventh and eighth grade. One goal of the boys' program is to help pull youth off the street—away from violence—and to give them something meaningful to do after school. The city recognized the efforts of these students and has donated computers to enhance their mentoring program.

A small proportion of the 21 Chairs who were interviewed described programs that were created as an outgrowth of the DtWT Program. Those programs include: mentoring programs, reading programs, a college preparedness program, and a lawyer educational program. Project Self was created as an outgrowth of the DtWT Challenge and maintains a similar mission as DtWT. Both programs seek to empower kids to become involved with creating positive solutions to problems within their community. The following is a description of how one community created Project Self as an outgrowth of DtWT:

> The DtWT program was already an established program, ...and we expanded it in a different way with the Extended Day Program...We tried to develop a program that we could show to kids, teachers, and their parents as well, that the children that we

> were involved with had the ability to write, understand, and recognize what was taking place around them...It was called Project Self [and it emphasized] the children's ability to recognize the basic strengths that they have, their survival skills, their ability to succeed. So the program, Project Self, talks about how, starting with self, they are able to effect positive self change...that could eventually lead to more global change.

Another Chair explained that, as a direct outgrowth of *Do the Write Thing*, a reading program was created. This Chair became concerned as a result of observing the poor quality of the student writings that were being submitted to DtWT. After speaking with the superintendent, he learned that many students are reading and writing at low grade levels but will not attend remedial reading programs. After realizing that many students entering the Juvenile Justice System had poor reading and writing skills, he created this program. Students involved with the Juvenile Justice System are required to participate:

> [Students involved with the Juvenile Justice System] were probably reading at less than a sixth grade level in the majority of cases, and so we came up with a reading program where the kids who came through the juvenile courts and weren't reading well were required to participate as a part of their probationary rules. The superintendent told us that, 'the biggest problem that we have is making students come to the remedial reading classes.' And I said, 'that will not be a problem for our kids, they'll either be there or we'll put them in detention.' So that was another good outgrowth of the program.

6.5 Summary and Discussion

Though teachers and local Chairs provided many examples of the impact that the DtWT program had on students, many said that that they were unaware of the impact the program might have had in schools and communities thus far. Some Chairs explained that they could not determine the impact that the program has had on their school or community because of limitations associated with the program's dosage and/or because they do not have enough follow up with students or schools in order to accurately assess these outcomes. Some teachers believed that the program was simply too new to see anything yet.

However, in addition to these possible explanations, it is likely the case that schools and communities could do more to follow up with the ideas put forth in students' DtWT submissions. Several Chairs felt that their communities could do better in this regard and reported that one goal for the future would be to establish new programs within their community that would

function as an outgrowth of DtWT. Another goal mentioned by many Chairs was to do more to ensure that student ideas are integrated into school and community policy as well.

To reach these goals, Chairs may want to collaborate with teachers and schools to establish programs within their community and might even consider adopting programs that already have been successfully integrated into other DtWT communities such as reading, tutoring, college preparedness, or mentoring programs. For this type of progress to be accomplished, however, a more formal relationship between Chairs and schools may need to be established. It may be beneficial for teachers to debrief with other teachers and principals about student ideas once the school year has ended. Perhaps Chairs could inquire within schools as to whether any DtWT teachers would be interested in forming a committee to explore the need for and ideas about violence prevention programming based on student ideas. Interested students should also be invited to participate.

Teachers and Chairs may want to consider working with school boards and city councils in order to identify ways in which students' ideas could be used to influence policy and programming. DtWT localities that have already adopted successful programs could share information regarding lessons learned and best practices in order to facilitate successful program implementation in new locations. In addition, distributing the booklet of finalists' writings more broadly to various people of influence within a community may be one way to garner support for new policies and programming.

7. PROGRAM STRENGTHS AND AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

At the conclusion of all interviews, DtWT teachers, local Chairs, and students were asked to comment on what they believed were the strengths of the *Do the Write Thing* program as well as potential gaps. In this section, a discussion of program strengths and suggestions for improvement is presented, organized by interview respondent groups. Feedback from teachers is presented first, followed by feedback from local program Chairs. Lastly, student data are presented along with a summary discussion and recommendations.

7.1 Teacher Feedback

Strengths

Responses from teachers varied somewhat; however, there was some common feedback about the strengths of the DtWT program. In large part, feedback on program strengths mirrored what respondents had already mentioned as program benefits. Approximately one third of teachers believed that the opportunity for students to express their experiences and emotions is one of the greatest strengths of the program. Teachers felt that many students do not have a

proper outlet for their strong feelings. For example, one teacher believed that the writing component of the program has been particularly helpful in allowing students the opportunity to vent. As she said, "... it [the program] gives kids the opportunity to put down in writing how they've been impacted by some situation or something that's ongoing that they may not be able to talk out loud." A constant theme in response to this question of program strength was that for youth to merely know that someone was listening to them made a huge difference in their lives.

Another third of teachers interviewed felt that a major strength of the program is the challenge it presents to students of finding ways to solve the problem of youth violence. These teachers felt that allowing children to have a "voice" about something as important as youth violence was crucial in order for them to become fully engaged in the process of identifying problems of violence and making a contribution to solving them. Most of the time, it was mentioned in the very same thought that the act of thinking about ways to solve the problem was beneficial itself. They believed students gained a better understanding of what violence is and how to think about differently. For example, one teacher said:

> [The *Do the Write Thing* program] allows kids to open up about what their lives are like and it challenges them to find ways of being non-violent. This is positive because it challenges them to think differently about violence.

Similarly, another fourth of teachers interviewed said that a strength this program offers is simply the awareness it brings to students. It may make them more cognizant of how they treat others and that the way they behave is there choice. When asked about the strengths of the program, one teacher said:

> The fact that it raises awareness with kids. Sometimes youth violence is done very innocently, things like remarks and comments or putdowns. And obviously that can be the root of bigger problems. So if kids raise their awareness and they're a little bit more aware of how they treat others, I think that overall that's a great strength.

Other strengths of the program that were mentioned by one or two teachers included:

- Relationship building between teachers and students
- Flexibility to implement the program to fit their class's needs
- Rewards that are offered to the winners

- Helpful contacts at the national office
- Structured essay questions
- Promotion of writing and improved writing skills
- Opportunity for kids to meet students from all over the country.

Areas for Improvement

Teachers were also asked how they believed the *Do the Write Thing* program could be improved. The most common response from teachers regarding how the DtWT program could be improved was that it needed to be more publicized. Over 25 percent of teachers reported that low publicity was a gap in the DtWT program strategy. Teachers postulated that if the program and its winning students had been better publicized in local newspapers, students would have become more involved. On a related note, around 15 percent of teachers mentioned that the program should be expanded to more schools and locations around the country. These teachers felt that the program was very positive, but could stand to grow in number of locations.

Just under a quarter of teachers interviewed suggested that the program should either be built into the class curriculum (e.g., as part of Character Education or Behavior Modification) or that it should "have more to it" in some way (e.g., more substance to the essay component). Some of these teachers believed that DtWT should develop its own curriculum to be implemented throughout the year, especially in at-risk schools. Others suggested that lesson plans could be provided to teachers to help teachers integrate the writing assignment into the regular classroom curriculum.

A handful of teachers suggested changing the timing of implementation. Some of them talked about how the writing component of DtWT conflicted with the focus on preparing for standardized testing. One teacher explained:

> Our school district starts [the DtWT program] right around Christmas and it's due the week after we have to take our state tests. By then the seventh graders have taken their writing test the third week of February and they're so tired of writing that they don't want to write an essay. If we could introduce this during the first week of the semester and have it due at the end of the semester, there would be more participation.

Feedback from teachers who attended the national award ceremony was fairly consistent. Several felt that there were too many speeches and/or sessions that students *had* to attend. They

believed that time would have been better spent for example, on a bus tour of the national monuments. More than one teacher remarked that instead of numerous sessions that involved speakers and presentations, there should have been just one big one. One teacher remarked, "[students] need to have time to get out and see the city, the monuments...there were too many sessions where the kids are talked to for an hour and a half. They don't need that."

Less frequently mentioned ideas for improvement of the program were:

- The need to utilize different standards for judging essays (belief that shock value plays a part in judges' decisions and not enough attention is paid to grammar and spelling)
- The need to require students to edit their essays for grammar (students typically must do this for every other writing assignment)
- The need to recruit schools earlier
- The need for more program structure (better lesson plans, more guidance from national office)
- The need for a Web site for teachers to use as a resource
- The need for more information about the history of the program and its ties to the Kuwaiti Ambassador.

7.2 Local Program Chair Feedback

Strengths

Chairs reported that the DTWT Challenge has a variety of strengths. Again, reported strengths were similar in nature to program outcomes. Nearly one quarter of Chairs agreed with teachers in their assessment that a major strength of DtWT is that it gives students a voice. Chairs also believed the program helps students realize that adults within their community are concerned with the problems that youth are facing and that adults value the opinions that youth have regarding solutions to these problems.

A small proportion of Chairs mentioned that DtWT has a strong National office and that local sites receive excellent support and technical assistance from them. In addition, support from the National program helps local communities recruit schools and garner support from community partners.

Chairs also believed that raising awareness of students and communities is an important program strength. Because the writings of finalists are distributed to people of influence within

local communities, student ideas have the potential to influence policy and provide adults with insight into the lives and experiences of youth.

Overall, there was substantial variation in terms of the program strengths reported by local Chairs. Examples of program strengths that were cited by only one or two Chairs included the following:

- The program provides a therapeutic benefit for participants
- The program has the potential to help inform policy makers
- The program targets at-risk kids
- The program recognizes student achievement
- The program fits well into school curricula.

Areas for Improvement

Nearly one third of Chairs who were interviewed agreed with teachers that the program needed to be expanded by increasing the number of schools and communities that participate in the DtWT Challenge. However, they realize that additional sponsorship and funding would be necessary to support program growth. Several Chairs mentioned that they already constantly struggle with the issue of funding. One Chair admitted, "I think that the biggest struggle for me as Chair is the funding issue and the need for continued funding... I can't tell you how much out of my own pocket I end up dedicating to this when we fall short."

The same proportion of Chairs also lamented that there needs to be more information exchange, interaction, and collaboration among the various DtWT localities.[7] Chairs often described how the only opportunity that they were afforded to meet with other hairs was at the National Award Ceremony, and that they would like more opportunities to meet and to exchange ideas related to program implementation.

A small number of Chairs commented on the need for better organization and coordination at the National level. These Chairs want the national office to provide DtWT localities with more materials and resources. In addition, these Chairs cited a need to improve the coordination of the National Award Ceremony. Several Chairs said they had been frustrated with the confusion and lack of coordination that occurred while trying to secure travel arrangements to DC, explaining that they did not receive any travel information until a couple of

[7] Since the time these data were collected, the National Office arranged for a meeting among local Chairs which took place in November 2004.

days prior to the event. Many characterized this as a significant burden to Chairs, teachers, students, and parents.

A range of other needs and suggestions offered by Chairs included the need for:

- Greater effort to apply students' ideas into policy and practice
- An accurate way to demonstrate program effectiveness
- Recognition of ever every teacher who implements the program
- Greater community awareness of the program
- Acceptance of multi-lingual submissions
- Reinforcement that teachers are not to mandate that students write an essay.

7.3 Student Feedback

Strengths

For National Finalists, DtWT program strengths mirrored what they saw as program effects. Half of students interviewed said the best thing about the program was that it gave "kids like us" a chance to travel and spend time in Washington, DC. Nine students thought the best thing about the program was its effectiveness in raising awareness about the program of youth violence so that it could be addressed. Two students believed that an important program strength was that it recognized kids as experts on youth violence and gave them a voice and a vehicle to express their ideas to adults.

Areas for Improvement

Seven out of 20 National Finalists had no complaints about the DtWT program, nor any suggestions for program betterment. However, half of students agreed that the program could be improved in terms of the content, organization, and logistics of National Award Ceremony activities. For instance, some students complained that they did not receive the itinerary for their trip to Washington, DC until one or two days before they were scheduled to leave. That made travel planning difficult and stressful for their parents. Students also suggested that the program would be better if kids had additional free time and opportunities to see the sites while they were in the nation's capital. Students referred to the importance of peer-to-peer learning when they suggested that more structured time could be spent hearing about other students' ideas and experiences rather than the "long speeches and lectures" from adults.

7.4 Discussion and Recommendations

A variety of program strengths were cited by DtWT teachers, local Chairs, and National Finalists. These program stakeholders agreed that the effectiveness of the program to raise student and community awareness is one its greatest strengths. A number of Chairs believed that the support offered to local communities by the national DtWT office and the freedom that local initiatives are given to adapt the DtWT to meet local needs are program strengths. Students felt strongly that providing students with the opportunity to travel to local and national award ceremonies is a paramount strength of the program.

The most common response from teachers and local Chairs regarding how the DtWT program could be improved was that it needed greater publicity. It may be helpful if local Chairs could help facilitate communication between schools and the media in order to recognize the schools and students for their achievement. As more people in the community become aware of the presence of DtWT in their community, this may also promote expansion of the program. Program expansion was a need identified by nearly one third of local program Chairs. However, increased resources would be necessary.

Many teachers verbalized a strong desire to either see the program formally integrated into school curriculum or see more components added to the program. *Do the Write Thing* may be much more effective if it were to be a regular part of students' courses. Some suggested that the classroom component should be longer or that it needed more substance. Other teachers thought it should be combined with specific classes such as Character Development. In the event that a teacher is already implementing such a class, it may be helpful if national headquarters offered curriculum ideas that allowed teachers to combine the two.

Local program Chairs spoke of the benefit sharing their experiences, challenges, and successes with one another and complained that there was not enough structure to do so. Teachers, too, might benefit from learning more about what DtWT looks like in other localities across the country. The development of an improved cross-community information sharing strategy may fill many of the gaps noted by interview respondents. For instance, the national DtWT Web site could be enhanced so that teachers could access curricula—either that developed by the national office or by DtWT localities. Here teachers could find information about the history of the program and could download student essays to share with their students. The national Web site also could include links to local DtWT Web sites. As well, there could be an area for posting questions and/or concerns about the program that could be monitored by staff in the national office. Chairs also could contribute to and reference such a Web site for information regarding successful fundraising strategies or other implementation ideas and lessons learned. An improved cross-community information sharing strategy may also include periodic meetings

among local program Chairs. In fact, the national DtWT office already has initiated a cross-site meeting for Chairs to discuss their ideas about and experiences with the program.

After speaking with chairs, teachers, and students, it became clear that The National *Do the Write Thing* award ceremony is a very special event. Making the most of it should be a priority for everyone involved with the DtWT program. Teachers and students alike felt that during their time in Washington, DC, they are not given enough time to visit the sites and take in the culture of the city. Several commented that it was unfortunate that students did not have enough opportunity or means to see the monuments, for example. Both groups felt that the sessions requiring student attendance were extensive and unnecessary. Reassessing the structure of various sessions and the number of speakers could be a way to address this issue in terms of students' free time. Investigating bus tour companies' policies on providing in-kind tours for students, parents, and teachers involved with such worthy causes as DtWT may be another idea.

8. SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Youth violence has been called a national public health problem and is a visible concern for communities around the country. Localities implementing the DtWT program are no exception. Chairs, teachers, and National Finalists cited numerous reasons why there is a need for the DtWT program in their local schools and community. All three groups commonly reported that their community and schools experience high rates of youth violence, and that youth violence prevention programming, such as DtWT, is one way to counteract and reduce this problem. Chairs and National Finalists also reported that there is an overall lack of awareness regarding the problem of youth violence within their community, and that DtWT allows adults and people of influence within a community to read about students' experiences with youth violence, which can help adults begin to comprehend the extent of the problem within their community. Chairs and National Finalists also recurrently described how DtWT gives students the opportunity to express their thoughts and ideas regarding their experiences with violence. This is of significant importance since students are so rarely afforded the opportunity to express their thoughts and ideas to adults and other people of influence within their community.

Programming to address the problem of youth violence is a fixture in many schools. Little research has been done to connect these programmatic prevention efforts with reduction in youth violence. However, oftentimes these programs aim to enhance protective factors and developmental assets of young people, theorizing that increases in these protective factors lead to decreases in risky or delinquency-related behaviors, including participation in violence.

The major findings from this qualitative evaluation of the DtWT program suggest that participation in the program can enhance student's self-concept in terms of their self-esteem,

pride, and self-efficacy. Interview respondents believed that the positive recognition that students received from parents, schools, and communities would motivate students to continue to strive for academic success and continued positive attention from the adults in their lives. This is in line with the literature that ties protective factors and positive assets such as self-esteem and bonds with adults to lower levels of risky or delinquent behavior. These influences are most likely to be felt by the minority of program participants who become local or National Finalists, rather than by students who submit an essay but are not recognized for their writing.

On the other hand, a large majority of interview respondents believed that awareness was raised among the majority of students who participated in the program, as well as teachers and other adults in the participating communities. Increased levels of awareness are important so that classrooms, schools, and communities can be motivated to do something about the problem once it is recognized. Also, in some instances, this awareness was observed to improve classroom climate and improve relationships between students and teachers. Nearly 70 percent of teachers felt their relationships with their students had improved as a result of DtWT. Further study of DtWT classrooms and students may shed more light upon the effects of the DtWT Challenge on a greater proportion of students and teachers who participate in the program.

Though interview respondents provided many examples of the impact of DtWT on students, low levels of school and community impact were reported. Many respondents felt that it was too early in the program's history to be able to observe such effects; others mentioned that a lack of follow-up between local Chairs and schools made it difficult to assess the potential impact on schools. In terms of program offshoots or other efforts to reduce youth violence, a small number of localities reported implementing mentoring, scholarship, and leadership programs as a result of DtWT. At the same time, many local Chairs mentioned that creating these types of programs is a priority for the future. Lack of resources is the main hindrance in this respect, but because a strong foundation of community support and commitment appears to have been built in many of these localities, there is the potential for such growth.

The interview respondents in our sample also reported low levels of student commitment to nonviolence as a result of program participation. When asked directly if they had made a commitment to non-violence as a result of their participation in the program, only a quarter of National Finalists interviewed said they had. Moreover, none of the National Finalists interviewed said they were involved in violence prevention efforts in their community. Though not necessarily an expectation of the DtWT program, this would be a good indication that students had made a firm commitment to combat youth violence in their lives and communities. Nearly half of students felt that they would be interested in participating in violence prevention efforts if the opportunity existed in their community, but most said they did not believe such opportunities existed. Thus, it might be important for the classroom component of DtWT to

include a discussion of local violence prevention programs and efforts with which students could become involved.

Participants in this evaluation outlined several recommendations to strengthen the DtWT program both locally and nationally. Peer-to-peer learning among students emerged as an important theme. Chairs and teachers wanted more opportunities and resources for cross-site sharing and learning (Web sites, meetings), including ideas of how to integrate DtWT into larger classroom curriculum. All interview participants advocated for changes to the national awards ceremony that could perhaps integrate all of the above ideas as well as to allow students more of a chance to see the nation's capitol.

As the literature suggests, it is important that prevention-focused activities in schools are well integrated into the regular school program and are highly structured. Thus, working at the national level to develop a standard DtWT curriculum that could be integrated consistently across localities and schools may improve the chances for effective outcomes associated with this program.

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APPENDIX
INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

National Finalist Interview Protocol

Do the Write Thing
National Finalist Interview Protocol

Notes to Interviewers:

Before beginning, introduce yourself to the student—explain who you are and the purpose of the interview. Establish rapport with the student and make her/him feel as comfortable as possible. As we discussed in training, explain very clearly to the student that you will be asking questions about their experiences with and thoughts/feelings about the DtWT program. Stress that we will NOT be asking about violence in their lives and that we will NOT be asking about the content of their winning essay.

Let the student know that her/his parent has given you permission to ask whether s/he wants to be interviewed about his/her experiences with the DtWT program but that it is ultimately the student's decision about whether or not to participate.

Then go over the assent form with the student. Be very clear with them that should he or she disclose that s/he has been abused by an adult or has been the victim of a felonious assault (e.g., rape) by a peer, you must report this to the proper authorities. This means that in all cases, except those in which the abuser is the teacher, you will report the incident or events to the teacher who has accompanied the student to D.C.

IMPORTANT: *Please remind the student that you are not a counselor and so are not prepared to deal with sensitive information regarding victimization or perpetration of violence. Discuss with the student that if you notice that s/he feels uncomfortable or becomes emotionally distressed at any point during the interview, you will end the interview and discuss with the student a plan for who needs to be contacted (e.g., friend, parent, teacher).*

If the student agrees to be interviewed, be sure to get permission to tape record the interview.

Ask if the student has any questions s/he wants to ask you before beginning the interview.

Background Information

1. What grade are you in? How old are you?

2. Where do you live (i.e., in what city and State do you live)?

   2a. Who do you live with? Describe your family.
   2b. Describe what your community/neighborhood is like.
   2c. What's do you like best about living in your community?
   2d. What's the worst thing about living in your community?

3. When you are back in [your community], what is your favorite thing to do? Explain.

   3a. Do you have a job?
   3b. What extracurricular activities are you involved in at school, if any (e.g., clubs, sports, youth groups).
   3c. Describe for me what you do on a typical day after school.
   3d. Describe for me what you do on a typical day in the summer.

4. What do you want to be when you grow up? Please explain.

5. Please explain to me why you decided to submit an essay for the Do the Write Thing Program?

Individual Impact

6. You've been very successful in this program and are a National Finalist. Can you describe for me how participating in DTWT (i.e., writing your essay) has affected or changed your life, if at all?

   6a. Describe for me how being a National Finalist makes you feel about yourself.
   6b. Did you feel that way about yourself before you found out you were chosen as a National Finalist? Why or why not?
   6c. Describe how you felt when they announced that you won at the local award ceremony.
   6d. Has anything like that ever happened to you before? Please explain.

7. What did you learn about youth violence by participating in the program?

8. How does it make you feel to know that influential adults in your school and in your community read your ideas about the problem of youth violence?

   8a. Do you believe that the adults in your school and community will take your ideas and advice about stopping youth violence (i.e., will adults really listen to kids)? Why or why not?
   8b. Has participation in the DTWT program changed the way you feel about and/or the relationship you have with your teacher? Please explain.

9. Tell me about some of the things that have happened in your life because of your participation in the program that might otherwise not have happened to you.

9a. Have you received any mentoring, job skills, scholarships as a result of participating in the program? If so, have you been able to use these skills in your everyday life?

9b. Prior to being selected as a National Finalist, where else have you traveled? Is this your first time in Washington, DC? If not for this program, do you think you would have gotten the opportunity to see Washington, DC?

10. Have you made a personal commitment not to engage in violent acts as a result of participating in the program? What does that mean to you?

10a. As a result of your participation in this program, do you volunteer or participate in any programs or activities to help prevent or reduce violence in your community? If so, please describe. If not, why not?

School/Community Program Impact

11. Have you seen any changes in your classmates and/or in your school as a result of participating in the Do the Write Thing Program? Please describe.

12. Have any of your ideas been used to help make school or classroom rules?

13. Do you think that this program helps to build better relationships between students and teachers? Why or why not?

Program Strengths and Weaknesses

14. In your opinion, what is the best thing about the Do the Write Thing program? Please explain.

15. Do you have any suggestions for improving the Do the Write Thing program? Please explain.

16. Do you think it is important for kids to participate in the DTWT program? Please explain.

16a. Why do you think it's important to allow students the opportunity to express their attitudes and ideas about violence to adults?

17. In the future, do you think you will be involved in helping to stop violence among youth in your community? If so, how? If not, why not?

Local Chairperson Interview Protocol

Do the Write Thing
Local Chairperson Interview Protocol

Background Information

1. Please describe your local community (e.g., rural/urban, economics, racial/ethnic profile, etc.).

   1a. Are the local schools that participate in DTWT in your community similar or different in terms of demographics? Please explain.

2. Please describe for me the kind of work that you do.

3. How did you come to be involved with the DTWT program?

   3a. How long have you been involved with the program?
   3b. Did you receive any training on the DTWT program prior to becoming involved? Please explain.
   3c. Please describe what you see as the need for the DTWT program in your community.

4. Please describe for me what you see as the goals and objectives of the DTWT program.

   4a. What do you see as your roles and responsibilities as local Chair person in helping to meet those goals and objectives?
   4b. (If not mentioned, probe about fundraising activities in which they've been involved).
   4c. Do you have personal goals and objectives for the program different from those mentioned above? Please explain.

Program Implementation

1. How many schools participated in the Do the Write Thing Program in your locality during the 2003-04 school year?

   1a. How many students from your locality participated in the program last year (i.e., received the classroom component of DtWT)?
   1b. How many essays did students from your locality submit during the 2003-04 school year?

2. Tell me what is involved in implementing the DtWT program in your locality.

   2a. Who is involved?
   2b. How are schools approached and involved in DtWT? What information/instructions are they given about the DtWT program?

2c. How are local people selected to judge the essays?
2d. Are there specific criteria for rating the essays and selecting the winners from your locality? Please explain.
2e. How do you prepare for the local award ceremony?
2f. What else is involved that I haven't asked about?

3. In your locality, do you implement any violence prevention activities related to DTWT other than the classroom discussion and essay-writing components of the program (i.e., do you implement any other local "spin-off" programs such as the Community Peach Partnerships?)? If so, please describe such programs.

School/Community Program Impact

1. In what ways has Do the Write Thing had an impact on schools and communities?

   1a. Can you provide us with some examples of successes and/or opportunities that participation in this program presents to youth in your community?

2. Please describe any instances in which students' ideas have been integrated into the school and/or community policy? In other words, have student ideas had any impact on the development of local strategies to prevent violence?

   2a. Are there other "off-shoots" of this program in your community (e.g., Community Peace Partnerships; after-school mentoring programs; other youth programs with a focus on violence prevention?

Program Strengths and Weaknesses

1. In your opinion, what are the main strengths of the DTWT program?

2. How would you suggest that the DTWT program could be improved, if at all?

3. Lastly, is there anything you would like to discuss that I did not ask about?

Teacher Interview Protocol

Do the Write Thing
Teacher Interview Protocol

Background Information

1. Describe the community in which you currently teach (e.g., rural/urban, economics, racial/ethnic profile, etc.).

2. For how long have you been a middle school teacher?

3. For how many years have you used the DTWT program in your classroom?

Program Implementation

1. Describe any instruction and/or guidance you received for implementing DTWT in your classroom.

2. Please describe how the program is implemented in your classroom.

   2a. In what grade(s) do you personally teach the program?

   2b. How many "sessions" do you talk about youth violence as part of this program?

   2c. During what "subject" is DTWT taught in your classroom (or is it not integrated into a particular subject?)?

   2d. Do you require your students to write essays, or is it voluntary?

3. How many students received the program in your classroom during the 2003-04 school year?

   3a. Among those who participated, approximately how many submitted essays?

4. In your opinion, does anything distinguish students who choose to write essays from those who decide not to write essays?

5. If so, please describe any patterns you've seen.

   5a. Have you been surprised at all in terms of the number and/or types of students who choose to write essays? Please explain.

Program Impact on Students

1. In your opinion, what kind of impact do you think this program has had on participants, if any?

   1a. If applicable, describe a specific example of how you've seen a student (or students) change as a result of program participation.

2. Have any of your students had the opportunity to travel to DC to participate in the National award ceremony? Local award ceremonies? If yes, what impact do you think the opportunity had on student(s)?

3. Can you provide us with some examples of successes and/or opportunities that participation in this program presents to youth in your community?

4. Have any of your students participated in internship and/or mentoring opportunities offered by organizations that are involved with this program? If yes, describe the impact you think these programs have had on students?

5. Have any of your students been provided scholarships through the Do the Write Thing Program? Please explain.

6. Have any of your students decided to participate in volunteer activities or youth programs that promote local efforts to reduce or prevent violence? Please describe.

7. Generally, how do you think students benefit from the opportunity to provide insight into ways to solve the problem of violence, if at all?
   7a. Similarly, what are the benefits of allowing students the opportunity to use written words and open discussions to express their attitudes towards violence?

8. Do you think that this program has the ability to empower participants to become involved in creating solutions to youth violence? Please explain.

School/Community Program Impact

1. In your opinion, is youth violence a problem in your school and/or community?
   1a. If so, is DTWT a solution to this problem? Why or why not?

2. In what ways has Do the Write Thing had an impact on your school and community, if at all? Please give specific examples.

3. Can you provide any instances in which students' ideas have been integrated into the school and/or community policy? Explain.

   3a. Have student ideas had any impact on the development of local strategies to prevent violence?

   3b. Are there other "off-shoots" of this program in your community (e.g., Community Peace Partnerships)?

4. What are the benefits to teachers/schools of implementing the DTWT program, if any?

   4a. Do you personally believe that this program helps to build stronger relationships between students and teachers? For example, does the program help to create an open atmosphere of communication and trust within the classroom? Why/why not?

   4b. Have your personal views on, or understanding of, youth violence changed as a result of dialoguing with your students in the Do the Write Thing program? Please explain.

Program Strengths and Weaknesses

1. What do you believe are the main strengths of the DTWT program?

2. How could the Do the Write Thing program be improved, if at all?

3. Finally, will your class participate in the Do the Write Thing program again next year? Why or why not?