Using Student Writing Samples
to Improve Teacher Instruction

Gathering teachers to review samples of student work is one of the best, most underused professional activities, offering many benefits. The exercise helps calibrate writing expectations at and across grade levels while cutting down on subjectivity. It helps teachers identify common problem areas and gaps in writing instruction that they can work on as a team. It provides teachers with a bank of student samples to use for modeling and class analyses. And it builds teachers' comfort level with writing.

You can use student writing samples with your staff in many ways. The following are three of our favorites.

Activity #1: Single Paper Analysis

Share one student writing sample with the whole group. Facilitate one or more of the following activities, starting with a Type One or Type Two prompt from the list on page 2, to get your teachers focused:
- Teachers score the paper individually using the predetermined Focus Correction Areas (FCAs) or a common rubric. Share and discuss results.
- Analyze paper's strengths and weaknesses as a group.
- Determine two to three instructional goals or future FCAs for the writer. Discuss instructional strategies that would target the selected goal.
- Practice providing clear, actionable feedback to the writer.
- Analyze the FCAs chosen for the assignment. Were these the best FCAs for the task? How might teachers improve the FCAs to yield a better product?
- Discuss how this paper might be used to model a new skill, correct a common error, or practice revising and editing skills.

Activity #2: Cross-Section Analysis

Ask teachers to bring three samples of student writing at different performance levels. Pose a Type One or Type Two prompt from the list on page 2 to get your teachers focused. Work in small groups to complete one or more of the following:
- Teachers discuss why they selected each paper, and the group compares strengths and weaknesses.
- Teachers individually score each paper using predetermined FCAs or a common rubric and then compare results. This will also help calibrate grading expectations among your teachers.
- Determine one instructional goal and one future FCA for each paper. Discuss instructional strategies to move each student forward, even those who are already strong writers.

- Discuss how each paper might be used to model a new skill, correct a common error, or practice revising and editing skills.

Activity #3 Class Set Analysis

Ask teachers to bring a class set of student writing from a single assignment. Pose a Type One or Type Two prompt from the list below to get your teachers focused. Work in small groups to complete one or more of the following:
- Identify patterns of errors in each class, team, or grade level. Discuss instructional strategies to address identified errors.
- Identify and save papers that might be used to model a new skill, correct a common error, or practice revising and editing skills.
- Sort papers into three groups based upon writing proficiency. Design a quick revising and editing activity for each group to address areas where writing can be improved.

Great Type One and Two Prompts
to Get Teachers Talking About Student Writing

Using your professional development goals as a guide, select one or more of the following prompts to jumpstart staff discussions of student work. Consider using this technique to start each faculty meeting with a new focus on student writing.

1. What score would you give the selected paper and why?

2. Identify one strength and one area in need of improvement in the selected paper.

3. Identify two goals for the student and an FCA related to each for the selected paper.

4. Do you agree with the score and feedback given for the selected paper? Explain.

5. How would you use the selected paper as part of your class instruction?

6. How would you improve the FCAs used in the selected assignment?

7. Identify two to three pieces of brief, actionable feedback you would provide to the selected paper's writer.

8. If the selected paper represented the majority of your class, what follow-up instruction would you give and how would you give it?

9. Design a mini-lesson to address one problem in the selected paper. Briefly list the lesson objective and two to three steps you would take to carry out the lesson.

10. Create a Type One or Two prompt to use with students who are reviewing this paper.