Survey reveals problems with writing instruction in elementary schools

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A new survey of teachers published in The Elementary School Journal suggests that there are serious problems with writing instruction in American elementary schools.

Researchers from Vanderbilt University surveyed a nationwide sample of 300 fourth, fifth, and sixth grade teachers about their writing instruction practices. Teachers responding to the survey reported spending only about 15 minutes per day explicitly teaching writing, and their students averaged just 25 minutes per day writing text at least paragraph length or longer.

In addition, two-thirds of the teachers surveyed felt their college coursework left them ill-prepared to teach writing to their students.

“[T]he findings from this study indicate that contemporary writing instruction in the upper elementary grades is in need of reform and that such reform must be multifaceted,” write the study’s authors, Jennifer Gilbert and Steve Graham.

The researchers also asked teachers what kinds of writing tasks they assign. According to the responses, assignments were mostly “writing to learn” exercises such as writing short answer responses, completing worksheets or writing in response to reading material. Other types of writing—such as writing to inform, writing to describe, and writing research reports—were rarely assigned.

The researchers say the findings indicate that teacher education programs need to provide better preparation to teach writing and teachers should devote more class time to writing instruction.

“Particularly important is the need for states to develop or revise existing policies concerning the teaching of writing,” Gilbert and Graham write. “They need to develop guidelines and procedures for ensuring that all teachers, new and existing ones, are well prepared to teach writing. This should be done in partnership with universities and colleges, but it is important that the application of proven, evidence-based teacher practices is emphasized.”

More information: Jennifer Gilbert and Steve Graham, “Teaching Writing to Elementary Students in Grades 4-6: A National Survey.” The Elementary School Journal 110:4 (June 2010).

Provided by University of Chicago

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