

Writin' Titans attract nationwide attention

By Cara Howard
for El Paso Journal

"Your 10-page essay will be due next Friday."

Most of us remember hearing a teacher make this type of announcement many times over our educational career, and rarely was it one we looked forward to. An assigned essay meant extra trips to the library, many late nights, and sometimes, a disappointing grade.

What if writing could be a positive experience for students? What if they were taught skills to make their writing more cohesive and more successful, and the presentations of their work more professional?

At the State of the Schools meeting on Nov. 8, El Paso-Gridley teacher Rich Martin and students Mya Gramm, Ashlyn Mool, and Allison Kelly, from El Paso-Gridley Junior High, presented an update on a program called "Writin' Titans." It is a system of peer collaboration to assist third, sixth, seventh and eighth graders with their writing and presentation assignments. Their mission is to help students become more capable, knowledgeable writers by providing them skills to help both with current tasks as well as future assignments.

Many colleges have a writing center where students can work with others to make sure their skills are up-to-par, but implementing it at the junior high level is almost unheard of.

In fact, the Writin' Titan program is so unique that it has been attracting almost nationwide attention. Last year, the students shared their program at the Illinois Association for Teachers of English conference, and this December, they will present at the Illinois Raising Student Achievement conference. Additionally, the program coordinators have been contacted by teachers in Florida, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania who are looking to set up a program similar to the Writin' Titans.

"There's not a lot of junior

high writing centers, but I think it's something that's on the rise, because people are recognizing the value of it and the fact that collaboration really should be part of the writing process," Martin explained.

If a child wants to participate in the program, all they need to do is request a pass to the writing center during their study hall. Then they meet with a Writin' Titan student coach in the computer lab to discuss whatever aspect of writing or presenting needs to be worked on during the session.

The student coaches were quite adamant that they do not do the assignments for the peers who are requesting assistance.

"We're called coaches because like a coach, we're on the sidelines, providing advice and strategies. We're not on the court or the field, so to speak, doing the actual writing. The writer does the writing; we're just there to provide support," one student coach explained.

The coaches are thoroughly trained in how to most effectively help their peers throughout the first quarter of the school year, and then have monthly meetings for the remainder of the year to fine tune their training and troubleshoot any issues that may arise.

Since beginning in October of 2013, more than 1,000 student coaches have completed more than 1,000 consultations. While there haven't been any formal standardized tests to see if the Writin' Titan program has made an impact on overall writing performance, El Paso-Gridley Junior High Principal Robby Tomlinson is proud of how the program is going.

"It's been a great program and a valuable asset to the junior high. It has also given our district some very positive recognition not only in our area, but across several states," he says.

To learn more, check out the program's website at www.writintitans.weebly.com.

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By Cara How

for El Paso Journa

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