



# ON TARGET

A BI-MONTHLY REPORT FROM TARGETED LEADERSHIP CONSULTING

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## Writing Their Way to Success

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In an interview conducted by the American Association of University Women,<sup>1</sup> a Latina student shared a comment that her father often made to her: “When you educate a man, you educate an individual. But when you educate a woman, you educate the whole family.”

One program designed to improve Latinas’ education outlook is the Girls at Promise Writing Club, which provides a place for Latina youth who are struggling academically or behaviorally to share their lives through writing, visual arts, and field trips. Since implementing the program in November 2007, we have met twice each month with a dozen first- and second-generation Latinas at Bell Gardens Intermediate School, which is located eight miles south of East Los Angeles. Approximately 98 percent of students at Bell Gardens are Latinos (mostly Mexican and Mexican American); 50 percent are English language learners; and 85 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch.

The Girls at Promise Writing Club is committed to the belief that first- and second-generation immigrant girls can become exceptional writers when provided with three supports.

**Engaging writing instruction.** Through sharing visual arts, photography, and stories, students discuss what their lives are like moving from their current situation toward future aspirations. The club organizes writing events around broad themes—self, family, community, and the future—and short relevant literature related to the urban Latino experience. For example, the girls read a student essay by Loretta Chan titled, “Tired of Being a Target.” The writing prompt for that day was *Write about a time when you felt like a target.*

To help the girls expand their narratives, we used a modified writer’s workshop in which the students wrote and shared in short, frequent intervals. We encouraged the girls with limited English proficiency to write and discuss in Spanish; small-group sessions and teacher-student conferences provided additional support with writing skills.

Over the course of the program’s first year, the girls began to enjoy writing because they liked sharing their stories. As time progressed, they became more confident and began to develop identities as writers.

**Flexible learning opportunities.** Although originally we attempted to rush the process to cover more themes, we quickly learned that instruction suffered as a result. By slowing down to listen and support students, we accomplished more and were better able to meet students’ needs.

For example, during the first session, one girl told the story of her father’s arrest, imprisonment, and deportation. In tears, she spoke about the strain the event placed on her family. That day, many of the girls opened up regarding family experiences related to incarceration. Slowing down to listen and following up with time to write and share taught all of us about the healing power of writing.

It also enabled us to teach some lessons about respectful listening. The girls had a lot to communicate, but they were not always good listeners. We decided to generate behavior agreements and model respectful listening and appropriate ways to give feedback. As the girls gradually learned to listen, they began to talk about writing in more sophisticated ways. They learned that

they weren't alone in the challenges they wrote about, and they became more respectful of one another as a result.

**Consistent mentorship.** At one point, we took the girls on a field trip to Pacific Oaks College. Although the purpose was for the girls to have access to technology, we realized the benefits of expanding networks and experiences through field trips. During the 30-minute drive back and forth, we connected to the girls in ways that extended beyond writing. The conversations served as sobering reminders of the complexity of the lives of immigrant youth in urban areas: the day-to-day survival, the poverty, and the fear.

As our relationship with the girls deepened, the writing became more personal. We had the good fortune to have support from the principal and counselors as we entered territory that often blurred the lines between the private and public selves. One of the school counselors, a Latina who had grown up in East Los Angeles, began attending sessions to assist when difficult topics

came up. She became a role model, providing the girls with a glimpse of what might lie ahead for them if they did well in school.

Our involvement in the writing club and the improvement in the students' writing have made one thing clear: The best writing programs challenge students to meet their potential by teaching them not only about writing but also about building caring relationships and networks inside and outside the community.

## About the Authors

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## "Where I'm From"

I am from the joy and love of my family  
A square dining room table in the corner of the kitchen  
I am from the backyard filled with adoring brothers and nieces  
From toys and a hammock hanging from a huge tree  
I am from a neighborhood full of scary gangsters  
Hanging out in the corner with their baggy clothes and hard faces  
Some cool, some bad  
I am from Ariel, a wonderful dad that makes delicious caldo de res  
I am from, "Si yo tubiera tu edad yo estubiera en la escuela estudiando duro  
para agarrar una carrerra" (If I was your age, I would study hard to get a career)  
My mom makes me want to work hard so I can make my family proud  
I am from dark, rich mole, juicy red enchiladas and warm menudo  
I am from the secrets I keep in my heart

—**Liliana, 13 years old**

1 American Association of University Women. (2001) ¡Si SePuede! Yes We Can! Washington, DC: Author.

## A TOOL FOR LEADERS

Districts and schools all over the country are working to close the achievement gap. One key strategy in this quest is finding creative ways to engage students who feel disconnected from their learning. After reading this issue of On Target, use the following activity with members from your school and/or central office staff to discuss ways to reach students who are falling through the cracks. Take time to reflect on your own setting and identify what good work you are already doing and what one or two things you might borrow from this example to improve your system-wide results.

### Objectives:

1. Participants will have the opportunity to read the article **Writing Their Way to Success** and identify strategies that helped these students re-engage.
2. Participants will identify strategies they are already using and compare those to the ones listed in the On Target Report.
3. Participants will select one or two strategies to try and develop an action plan to implement in their school/district.

### Steps:

1. Read: **Writing Their Way to Success** – our Spring On Target Report which talks about “students at promise”. How is this different from talking about “students at risk?”
2. How do we currently identify “students at promise” in our school or district? What characteristics do we look for? What data do we use?
3. This article describes a program that uses writing as the vehicle to help students better understand themselves as well as improve their writing skills. Other similar programs use discussion groups around books and literature, some focus on outdoor education and physical challenge. What do we currently have in place in our school or district to address our “students at promise?”
4. Identify 1 or 2 strategies or programs that you may want to implement at your school or district.
5. Complete the Next Steps Action Planner.

### NEXT STEPS ACTION PLANNER

| 1 or 2 New Strategies | When | Who | Follow Up |
|-----------------------|------|-----|-----------|
|                       |      |     |           |