***Rationale for Writin’ Titan Student-to-Student Coaching Program***

1. I’ve had past discussions with colleagues from other departments in which they’ve expressed how tedious it can be to deal with student essays.  I interpreted them feeling as though assigning writing almost isn’t worth the trouble. Their complaints centered on the exorbitant amount of time it takes to assess and comment on papers, as well as how frustrating it is to get back papers that are unfocused and poorly written.  I got the impression that they'd like to offer their students more individual guidance in crafting their essays, but they simply didn’t have the time.  The Writin’ Titan Program would pair skilled writers with struggling students who could provide the type of individual tutoring that is unfeasible for a teacher to fit into his/her packed schedule. The Writin’ Titan Program (WTP) would be an extra hand in helping students piece together successful written work across the curriculum.

2. Speaking from my own perspective, I too am unable to find the time in class to work individually with every writer who needs extra guidance. When we are working on an essay in class, I throw myself into helping every kid I can, hurriedly hopping from student to student, offering quick advice so I can move on to the next kid with a question. I’ve gotten pretty good at playing editor to the 100+ kids I see on a daily basis. However, after a decade of teaching writing, I still haven’t found a way to stop every single struggling writer from slipping through the cracks. The WTP will go a long way in making sure help is readily available to every kid who needs it.

3. In addition, some students may respond better to writing guidance from a classmate than from the teacher. I can think of instances in my own classroom where despite repeating instructions, a student still doesn’t seem to grasp what I want them to do. When this situation arises, I’ve learned to ask one of my more advanced students to nudge the struggling student in the right direction—and it works. For whatever reason, the classmate was able to relay the instructions more effectively than . Perhaps the struggling writer’s classmate was able to express the expectations in terms the struggling student found more relatable. Of course, students are sometime intimidated by a teacher in a class where they’re performing poorly. They may feel more comfortable seeking extra help from a classmate through the WTP.

4. Furthermore, there has been much written about the benefits of collaboration in the writing process. Put simply, two heads are better than one, particularly when it comes to composition. Any writer, regardless of skill level, profits from having another person to bounce ideas off of, another reader to judge whether a piece of writing flows smoothly and accomplishes its purpose, another set of eyes to help scan for errors. Having classmates available to work with on their writing could be extremely advantageous to our students. With the proper support from administration, staff, and student writing coaches, the general student body could discover our WTP to be a valuable resource.

5. I’m alarmed at the poor quality of writing some of my 8th graders are still demonstrating at year’s end. They’ve done enough homework and jumped though enough hoops to earn a passing grade in language arts. Nevertheless, I’m ashamed and embarrassed that I’m moving them on to high school, when clearly they are not ready to succeed at high school writing. The WTP will not reform every poor writer’s composition skills, but it’s something. It’s another intervention our school easily can offer in the way of helping struggling students. As a language arts teacher, I’m compelled to do everything I can to prepare students for next level of writing that will be required of them. Judging from my research and from discussions with teachers who have created and directed student-led writing centers, I know this would have a substantial positive impact on students’ writing.

6. Those who would benefit the most from this program would be the writing coaches themselves. For one, coaches would be receiving first-rate instruction in writing not just from coaching training, but from having to help other students work through the writing process. The old adage applies here—the best way to learn something is to teach it to others. Students with coaching experience would leave our school with an unparalleled level of knowledge about writing for their age. Perhaps even more valuable, however, is the experience they’d gain from working with peers. This is a program that would help coaches develop two of the most important real-world skills—communication skills and interpersonal skills.

7. In literature I’ve read by directors of student-led high school writing centers, they repeatedly mention how their centers made an impact on the entire school learning culture. Writing centers can revitalize focus and interest in writing across curricular departments and across the student body. With common core standards coming into play, the responsibility for writing instruction has spread from the language arts teacher to teachers of all subjects. The WTP would be a resource our whole staff could rely on to help support their writing-related instruction. For our students, the WTP has the potential to make getting extra help on writing assignments more attractive, even fun. If additional assistance is readily available and it is offered in the convivial format of working with a friend, students would be more likely to make the extra effort to achieve more in their written work.

8. The WTP would put our junior high in a category with only a handful of other junior high/middle schools in the nation who have a student-led writing center. Almost all colleges feature a writing center with student tutors. A few high schools have them. I’m not aware of any particular junior highs that have them (though I’ve been told by a lead scholar in the field that there are a few out there). So, this would truly be “cutting edge,” an innovative program our school could proudly tout. If the program is successful, and because of my involvement with ISU, this could potentially lead to conference presentations or even a published article that would showcase our school’s WTP as a model for others to emulate.

***Tentative Logistics for the Writin’ Titan Program***

1. Gail and I would ask for volunteers to be writing coaches at the beginning of the year, and we’d urge kids who we think would be good candidates to sign up. We’d try to get 16-18 total coaches between the 7th and 8th grade. To be qualified, coaches need to be friendly, have strong writing skills, be reliable, and be available. If we come up with unqualified coaches, we might tell them they’ll need to prove themselves in class the first quarter before they become coaches.

2. For the 1st quarter, I’d meet with the coaches twice a week for 20 minutes over lunch for training. They’ll begin coaching 2nd quarter. After the 1st quarter, we’d meet Fridays every other week over lunch to discuss how things are going. Next year, I’d use my elective as a training course. The training curriculum would include lessons on:

* Basic procedures for running a coaching session
* Our coaching guidelines and expectations
* How to help writers through each stage of the writing process
* How to teach writers to proofread their own work
* Building a friendly rapport with writers through active listening and reading non-verbals
* How to handle tricky situations that may arise
* Helping writers to find their voice
* Coaching in a non-directive way that leads the writer to do the work, not the coach

Each coach would have a binder full of this information for them to reference throughout the year.

3. I’d schedule two writing coaches to be in the computer lab during lunch and during study hall, Mondays through Thursdays. So ideally, a coach would only work one study hall or one lunch a week. However, I’d schedule more coaches based on demand. I’d try to do the scheduling ahead of time, so teachers know who may be missing from their study hall. Gail (maybe) and I could split the lunch supervision.

4. To go to a coaching session, 6th-8th grade students would need to get a Writin’ Titan referral from the teacher whose assignment they’re working on. I’ll distribute these referrals at the beginning of the second quarter. Teachers can give kids referrals, and students can ask for them.

5. We’d keep data on the Writin’ Titan program. I’d have a logbook in the lab where coaches record the following information for each session: writer’s name, teacher’s name, date, time, assignment, and a brief description of what was accomplished. On the back of the writer’s referral, the coach would also write a brief account of what was accomplished. These referrals would then be returned to the teacher’s mailbox.

6. At the beginning of the year, I’ll explain to staff what the Writin’ Titan Program is and how it can benefit their students. I’ll discuss what our coaches do and don’t do, so they know what to expect. Also, I’ll go over the referral process. Of course, I’d need to talk to Gail soon to find out her thoughts on the program and how involved she’d like to be.