The door opens and in walk my nervous and excited five-year-old students. Anticipation and apprehension are present on each face. How can I not be excited? It's like opening a box of crayons and smelling that wonderful new aroma sifting out and filling my senses with other first days.

Mary enters and hurriedly reaches out to take her nametag.

Billy hides behind his mother's legs and peeks around her. He is not sure of this person called a teacher.

Cathy cries silently as her mom leaves the room and runs to give her one last hug and kiss.

James confidently bounds in and says hello to several children he went to preschool with. He is outgoing and friendly.

I talk and move around welcoming each child and offering comforting words to each new student. I take snapshots of our first day together so I can send one home for parents who aren't as privileged as I am to witness this first stepping-stone to education. This is only the beginning.

By the end of the year, I have witnessed Mary growing into a confident reader and volunteering to read aloud for the class; Bill coming out of his shell and playing and laughing with his classmates; and Cathy finally gathering up enough confidence to raise her hand and ask me what the directions were for the math lesson.

But James struggled all year with learning. He became frustrated and angry. His temper was his act of defiance at not being able to learn what seemed to be easy for his classmates. He wanted to give up and not try. "It's too hard," he cried. I tried everything I knew and more. His mom was more than concerned; she was as frustrated as he was. He acted out in class and I knew it was because he didn't know what else to do. His mom thought he was just testing my limits in class, but I knew he was in danger of giving up and not trying any more.

Years of observing students have taught me to identify true frustration and I saw it in his eyes. What could I do to stop this and offer him success? I tried praise and encouragement, but the first time he struggled, he would revert back to his unsure ways. I was becoming concerned. Why couldn't I help this one child have confidence in himself? He was from a good home with caring parents and he could learn. He pushed away peers who tried to help and began to give in to despair. Then one day near the beginning of the fifth six-week period he began to understand he could learn. He could identify all his letters and sounds. He could count and identify the numerals to twenty-five. Big steps for a little one who was so frustrated. Smiles became prevalent and his hand would fly up with assurance when questions were asked. He didn't begin to read but he was headed in the right direction.

I don't know for sure what made the difference for him and I may never know. I can only hope that I can draw upon the things I experience in and out of my classroom to help me find new ways to help my students.

A child's first school experience can be an awakening of learning if I as a teacher can find the right key to open the door. Last summer I found some new ideas that have reawakened the learning in me. The West Tennessee Writing Project invitational institute is the best professional development opportunity I have participated in for many years. I am

Continued on page 7
On Fridays, my class waits for the AR top twenty lists to be published in the hall on the bulletin board.

"I beat so and so this week."

"I lack three points and I will catch up with Sam."

"I don't care if I am on that list or not."

Just how important is the Accelerated Reading program? I ask myself this question often. My colleagues and I discuss this issue a lot. Each school year, I am faced with the challenge of deciding how much I should use the AR program in my classroom. In our school, the AR program has just recently been implemented in the first grade. The third grade sets aside a designated time each day for their students to AR read. In fourth grade, we as a whole feel we cannot afford to use this much time for reading every day in addition to our designated hour for reading class. Our students take the TCAP Writing Assessment test. We need the extra time for writing.

Also, our principal and school librarian recognize the top twenty readers each week according to "points." This is an issue in itself. Teachers are stressing comprehension but the students are only worried about points.

The Competition Begins! Students faithfully search for this list on Fridays to see who is on top; however, there are those students who could care less. Even teachers seem to be in competition trying to get their students to read so they will have the most students on the list. This past year as we evaluated our test scores, we discovered as a whole group, the fourth grade lost gains in reading. Is it because of not having a big emphasis on the AR program in our classroom? Is the layout of the test harder than the third grade test?

I do know that the AR program can produce success stories. I had a student who came to me and did not like to read. I began the year by reading There Is a Boy in the Girls’ Restroom and Island of the Blue Dolphins. We did a lot of activities with these books including writing a lot. This student wanted to read the chapter after I had read to the class. He asked me questions and I would ask him questions in return. He began to take AR tests. He began to check out books. I caught him reading in his free time and he would want me to sit beside him for reassurance as he took his test.

He began to decode words and ask me if he pronounced them correctly. I saw that a fire had been lit. He eventually gained the confidence to take tests without me beside him. He once told me that he read a whole chapter while lying on the tractor with his poppy. This brought tears to my eyes. He developed the drive to read and wanted the challenge of taking the AR comprehension test after reading. He brought his reading level up from a second grade level to the top of the fourth grade level on the Star AR test. If students read a lot, their reading level is going to increase.

On the other hand, I get students who are burned out when they come to us in fourth grade. They are tired of reading. Parents often say that their child doesn’t like to read any more because the AR program has forced them to read for points instead of enjoyment or their teacher has required so many points per six weeks.

Deborah Meier, in The Power of Their Ideas, discusses how educators should make their own choices about how they run their classrooms and the curriculum they choose to use. Katie Wood Ray in The Writing Workshop stresses the importance of making time for writing and having a scheduled time for writing just as there is a scheduled time for lunch. I have a scheduled time for AR reading this year. In the past, I used a certain amount of minutes of my reading hour but as the year would proceed, I would get caught up in covering material or preparing for the big test. This year I have a scheduled time for reading, 10 to 11 every day. I still read books to my students to encourage reading.

In Literacy at the Crossroads Reggie Routman writes, "as demands for literacy in our society continue to increase, we need more students who can read, analyze, and use complex text, including those available on computers and electronic media." I want my students to read and to love reading. I will continue to use the Accelerated Reading program in my classroom to encourage reading and to improve comprehension skills. Reading is a major component of surviving in our world.

I emphasize to my students every year the importance of learning the multiplication facts and how they will need these facts all of their lives. Students will need reading all of their lives also.
Congratulations to these teacher consultants of WTWP:

Kathy Johnson, Brownsville Road Elementary, 3rd grade, Memphis, named last May as one of 10 recipients of the The Rotary Award for Teacher Excellence in the Memphis City Schools.

Mary Lou Marks, librarian at Camden Central High School, and Diana Griffin, 4th grade teacher at Dresden Elementary, recipients of the Distinguished Classroom Teacher Award from the Tennessee Education Association, two of three West Tennessee teachers so honored in Nashville in April.


Linda Montgomery, Henry County High School English Department Chair, a member of the TCAP Writing Assessment Scoring Committee, along with TC’s Kay Griffin and Mary Lou Marks.

Paula Cox, 3rd grade teacher at Briarwood School in Camden and WTWP Co-Director, appointed to the State Board of Education Advisory Council on Teacher Education and Certification.


Betty Warren, Halls High School English teacher, whose personal essay, "By three o'clock, it was time for a special visit," appeared in the July 3 edition of The Lauderdale Voice, Tomato Festival Special Edition.

Jenna Wright, UT Martin English faculty member, whose poem, "Old Friend," a tribute to Dr. Polly Glover, appeared in the most recent edition of the newsletter of the Tennessee Writers Alliance.

About the West Tennessee Writing Project

The West Tennessee Writing Project seeks to improve writing and writing instruction in our schools. It is a program of professional development for all teachers, K-12, from all subject-matter areas. Teacher consultants of WTWP believe in the power of writing as a learning tool and as key to implementing standards across the curriculum, encourage wide reading and writing among their students, and are committed to ongoing professional growth for themselves.

Headquartered in the Department of English at The University of Tennessee at Martin, WTWP is one of 160 sites of the National Writing Project and the only affiliate site of the National Writing Project in Tennessee.

WTWP operates under these principles: writing among school children will improve as writing instruction improves, the best teacher of a teacher is another teacher, and teachers of writing must be writers themselves.

The heart of WTWP is its annual invitational summer writing-reading institute for selected West Tennessee teachers, all subject-matter areas, all grades K-12. The institute is offered as a graduate seminar, English 700-701 and is open to teachers by application. The dates for the summer 2002 institute at UT Martin are June 10 - July 3, 2002. To request an application or to nominate a teacher to participate write, call, or e-mail WTWP. WTWP also organizes workshops and other professional development opportunities for teachers.

WTWP is supported by grants from the National Writing Project of the University of California, Berkeley with matching funds from The University of Tennessee at Martin. Additional gift contributions support particular workshops and programs.

The director of WTWP is Margrethe Ahschwede, Hardy M. Graham Distinguished Professor in English. Co-director is Paula Cox, 3rd grade teacher at Camden's Briarwood School. Technology liaison for WTWP is Sheryl Alford, librarian at Dresden Middle School. The WTWP Advisory Council also includes Molly Coffman, Jackson Central Merry High School; Diana Griffin, Dresden Elementary School; Beth Halbert, Mt. Juliet High School; and Betty Hicks, 5th grade teacher at Finley School. Staff support to WTWP is provided by Lisa Pentecost, principal secretary in the Department of English. WTWP interns for 2001-2002 include Tara Johnson, senior accounting major from Dyersburg, and Brandy Vowell, senior graphic design major from Martin.

For further information about workshops, the summer institute, and other programs of professional development from WTWP write or call: West Tennessee Writing Project, Department of English, UT Martin, 38238; 731.587.7290, 731.587.7300; FAX 731.587.7276; or e-mail: margahs@utm.edu

WTWP website: http://fmc.utm.edu/~mahlschw/Wtwp0.htm or access through UT Martin home page: www.utm.edu to Academics, College of Humanities and Fine Arts, English and then scroll down to West Tennessee Writing Project.

For information about the National Writing Project, see the NWP website: www.writingproject.org
Beyond my expectations

Molly Coffman, a teacher consultant of WTWP, teaches students in English classes at Jackson Central Merry High School where she also is the yearbook sponsor.

“Mrs. Coffman.” The mousy office aide with the waist-long brown hair interrupted my daily morning chat with Lee Ann Robins, the teacher across the hall.

“Yes?” I turned to see that the aide was not alone. Beside her stood a girl with brown hair braided tightly against her head in the front but hanging loosely down to her shoulder blades in the back. Her ears were studded and looped multiple times in the lobes and in the tops. She wore no make-up, a dark t-shirt, denim shorts, and bulky black tennis shoes. The mischievous twinkle in her eye told me that the smile on her face was not because she was happy to be there.

“You have a new student.” The aide handed me the girl’s schedule sheet, and I scanned it to be sure there was no mistake. English II, block 3, semester 2, Coffman. Unfortunately, I thought, she was at the right place.

“Okay, Michelle. . . is that what you go by?” I tried to mask my apprehension with a cheerful but authoritative tone.

“Yes.”

“You can sit in either the third or fourth seat on this first row.” I handed the schedule sheet to her as she slid into the third seat. Back at my post in the hall, I resumed my conversation with Lee Ann, passing the time until the tardy bell.

“You just better shut up.” Shouts erupted from inside my room. Quickly stepping back inside, I saw Sara, who had hardly spoken a word all semester, obviously agitated.

“What’s the problem in here?” My heart pounded faster, but my voice remained calm.

“I ain’t go no problem.”

Michelle’s voice was deep and booming. “I just asked her a question, and then she gotta go get an attitude.”

“She just needs to mind her own business,” Sara retorted.

I raised my hand shoulder high.

“Okay, let’s try to calm down. Are you going to have to go to the office on your first day here, Michelle?”

“No, ma’am.” She crossed her arms under her chest and hardened her facial expression. Believing the conflict was over, I stood in the doorway, one foot in the hall and one in the room. My heart rate began to slow, but my mind raced. Why does this have to happen to me? This class was so quiet, and she’s going to try to mess the whole thing up. Well, I won’t let her. If she gives me any trouble, I’ll just send her straight to the office.

After the morning procedures, I began promptly and worked the students busily and methodically for the rest of the class. I did not want any down time when trouble might get stirred up again. The 12:35 bell rang, and the students shuffled out murmuring. I locked my door and headed for the office to do a little research on my new student.

My assistant principal did not seem surprised that I was inquiring about Michelle. “She transferred from North Side after getting into trouble over there. If you have any more problems with her, just send her down.”

“Oh, I will,” I thought, ducking into the vault to stock up on discipline referrals.

That was the last time I talked to an administrator about Michelle. She came to class and basically got along with me and the other students. Now, she was no model student. She never completed homework assignments and completion of classwork was erratic. Occasionally, I would have to look crossways at her, signaling she was pressing the limits, but she always complied.

My once quiet, orderly, but mundane first block transformed into a rowdier and more lively crew. Class discussions were invigorated, her comments serving as the catalyst. She had good insight into the poems we read, offering her interpretations and connecting them to her life experiences. She especially liked Audre Lorde’s "Hanging Fire," Anne Sexton’s "Courage," and the poetry of Langston Hughes.

During our discussions, I discovered she lived in a group home, had a pretty good sense of humor, and was generally good-natured. After reading “Courage” I asked the class to write a response including explanations of figures of speech in the poem. The class was then asked to share voluntarily. Before Michelle transferred into my class, students were reluctant to read their responses, but Michelle was usually eager to share.
"When she [Sexton] says they ‘made you into an alien, and you drank their acid and concealed it,’ she’s talking about when people make fun of you and you try to act like it doesn’t bother you.”

"That’s good, Michelle. Did anyone else write about that particular metaphor?"

"Yeah. I wrote that the acid was like people dogging you all the time," Damien added.

"Good, Damien. So how are acid and insults the same?"

"They both burn."

"They both eat away at something."

"Exactly. Did anyone else want to share about that, or does anyone have a different figure of speech they’d like to talk about?" I was amazed and excited by the discussion of my usually silent and superficial sophomores.

"I didn’t really get the part about picking scabs off your heart and wringing it out like a sock. That just sounds really gross," Bethany wrinkled up her nose in disgust; Michelle’s hand shot up.

"I think the scabs on your heart are like old hurts or stuff that’s happened to you in the past and then something else bad happens, and it like rips open those old wounds and you feel like you did when it first happened." Fireworks exploded inside my heart. I could not believe how insightful Michelle was. This was by no means the only time she shocked me.

When working on Julius Caesar newspapers, I suggested the class form groups of two to four people. Desks shuffled; materials were gathered. I surveyed the room to see if anyone was still alone. In the middle of the room, Michelle leaned toward Mary, a special education student, already scrawling down ideas. Most days, Mary would attach to the group nearest her, or I would suggest that the smallest group include her. For some reason unknown to me even to this day, Michelle and Mary became partners.

In most ways the two girls were as different as a nun and a Las Vegas showgirl. Mary’s nuclear family was still intact; her parents were regulars at parent teacher conferences; they attended church together each Sunday. Michelle’s family consisted of probation officers and crisis counselors. In spite of all their differences, in one aspect they were alike—neither really had a place at school where they fit in.

For the next few days, Mary and Michelle reminded me of Shakespeare’s cunning conspirators. They whispered secretly and shielded their computer screen from their classmates. Finally, the day came to present.

"This is me and Mary’s newspaper, *The Roman Times*, and it’s the best,” Michelle boasted. Mary stood beside her, beaming.

"Look at this picture we scanned in.” The rest of the class and I were impressed by their effort and creativity.

These are the some of the highlights of my experience with Michelle. Her boisterous personality could be taxing to maintain. She sometimes would burst out with comments at inappropriate times and in an unrealistically loud volume. “I ain’t got no pencil! Oh, ‘I gotta go to the bathroom!” Flirtatiously poking Damien in the back, she might blur, “Man, you’re crazy,” responding to a conversation unheard or a look unnoticed by the rest of the class.

One day she recounted in detail a fight between two boys, portraying one of the two as a heroic leader. Another day I had to ask her to remove a blue bandanna, a well-known gang emblem, from her belt loop. With constant attention and observation, Michelle walked a line between apathy and achievement.

A few days before exams, another student in the class informed me that Michelle had been “sent up” and would not be back for the remainder of the year. Inexplicably, I felt relief. Actually, I felt a strange mixture of emotions—disappointment, concern, regret, helplessness—but overall, I still viewed her as a problem student and a disruption.

Only after reflecting on the year did I realize that rather than lamenting Michelle’s transferring into my class I should be thankful for the contributions she made.

What if I had harnessed Michelle’s strengths—her insights into literature, her individuality, and her willingness to discuss and connect—to work for me instead of simply trying to control her and make it to the end of the year with no disruptions? I missed an opportunity to channel her energy into her writing and to show her the value of her ideas.

Continued on page 7
Feel like the TCAP writing assessment is taking over your writing instruction? Perhaps eating up time in your crowded curriculum that could be better spent on other things?

The English faculty at Camden Central High School certainly felt this way, so when the opportunity to be part of the TCAP Writing Assessment Scoring Committee came along last spring, I agreed to participate. I spent two days in Nashville and came back with answers to the questions that have plagued us as well as a way of looking at the test that we could live with. Essentially, we can control the test; it doesn’t have to control us.

1. What can we do to ensure that our students do well?

Our students must have opportunities to write. One way to do this is to focus almost exclusively on the writing assessment so students are comfortable with the procedure. They can be taught patterns for essays (the five-paragraph organization strategy being the most common), transitions, introductions and conclusions, and strategies for writing to prompts under time pressure.

But there is a danger in this approach. It gives students the impression that all writing is this kind of high-stakes test-taking writing and that there are formulae that guarantee good writing and good scores.

Another way to prepare students to do well is to embed writing into the day-to-day curriculum so that they come to be confident, competent, fluent writers in a variety of genres. Then the writing assessment becomes one of those genres: writing under time constraints on an unfamiliar topic.

2. What counts in holistic scoring?

As frustratingly slippery as the published state department rubric seems, teachers and students should trust it. Dr. George Cheatham of Measurement, Inc., reminded us over and over again of two crucial points: these were rough drafts, and, once we had determined that the writer had done what had been asked, we should be rewarding writers for the things they had done well, not subtracting for errors. And he repeated, “Look at these as rough drafts. When you do, you can appreciate how well some of these are written.”

Occasional usage lapses were expected and overlooked, but error-free usage could not make up for inadequate development of ideas. Patterns of errors or high numbers of them did have an effect, as did immature or ineffectual word choice.

What the scoring is not is a deficit account with points being taken away for one error or another. It is a continuum where test papers are measured against anchor papers that exemplify the six scores.

3. What is an appropriate school goal and why?

Most school systems aim for a grade level three-year average of 4 competent. The three-year average is the number the state department uses on the school system’s report card. This goal is realistic. State-wide scores show that roughly 90% of students at all three tested grade levels score a 3 or above. The supervisors in Benton County and the public look at the system report card, but the faculty at CHS looks at the percentage of students receiving 4s and above.

We want our students’ records to show that they are competent writers by this measure as well as by their classroom work across the curriculum. If we do this, the report card will take care of itself.

4. What is the best way to explain the writing assessment to students?

I suspect most 4th and 7th graders have not yet developed the wily cynicism of high school juniors. They probably accept the test as an important part of their school record since the school is preparing them and telling them it is important. They are not yet asking, “What’s in it for me?” High school juniors are. Every year they ask, “What happens if I fail?” (Nothing.) “Does it affect my grade?” (No.) “What happens if I don’t take it?” (Nothing. There is no makeup.)

To counter these attitudes, we tell students that the test is an opportunity to demonstrate competence in a skill that is important whether they are headed into the workforce, the military, or college. We point out that the practice we are doing will increase the likelihood of a competent score. Most buy in to this view.
My experience on the TCAP Writing Assessment Scoring Committee reinforced my instincts and experience with student writers and validated what many studies have said about successful standardized test takers: they are confident, competent, and fluent. They can think and reason. They get this way by having broad background knowledge, from both experience and reading, and applying it in variety of situations. As students, they are becoming life-long learners, not life-long test takers.

In the end it matters less what our students make on one test taken on one February morning than that they become literate adults who can use writing to accomplish real tasks for real audiences. If we focus our writing instruction on that goal, the test becomes a bump, not a roadblock.

Supporting the West Tennessee Writing Project

The West Tennessee Writing Project receives financial contributions to its programs. Private giving is coordinated through the UTM Martin University Advancement and the University of Tennessee National Alumni Association Annual Giving Program. All gifts acknowledged and gifts of $100 or more are tax deductible for federal and state purposes. Mailing address: Office of University Advancement, 314 Administration Building, The University of Tennessee at Martin, 38238, 30238, 30238.

W T W P
A site of the National Writing Project

6 in education allows for 18 hours of subject matter

The MS in Education offered by the UT Martin College of Education Behavioral Studies allows 18 hours of subject-matter specialty, including Graduate courses in English also count as points toward teacher certification (check with supervisors or peers) or as part of the “thirty above” requirement. For information about admission to the graduate programs at UT Martin, contact the Graduate Studies, 309 Administration Building, UT Martin, 38238, 731.587.7012.

For information about the MS in education, contact Dr. Bonnie Daniel, coordinator of graduate work, the College of Education and Behavioral Studies, 237 Gooch Hall, UT Martin, 38238, 731.587.7125.

For course offerings, click on academics, then go to College of Humanities and Fine Arts, and then to English Department. Scroll down for lists of course offerings. To learn more about the MS in education, go to the UT Martin home page, then to Academics, to College of Education and Behavioral Studies, and then to graduate degrees.

Field Notes 7
Professional development opportunities for teachers

Spring Semester - English 510: Fiction Writing Workshop, to be taught through UT Martin in Jackson on Mondays after school beginning January 7, 2002. Teacher: Margrethe Ahlschwede. To register, call Office of Extended Campus and Continuing Education, 731.487-7080. Teachers not already accepted for graduate work at UTM will need to apply for graduate admission, and if not currently taking graduate courses at UTM will need to update their applications. For this, call the Office of Graduate Studies, 731.587.7012.

February 16, 2002, at Briarwood School in Camden - “Painting the Literacy Canvas”- annual workshop for K-8 teachers. Keep an eye out for brochures and newspaper publicity, for program details and Teacher Consultant presenters. “Life is a great big canvas, and you should throw all the paint on it you can.”-Danny Kaye

Spring 2002 - Writing workshop in collaboration with the Tennessee Writers Alliance, Martin. Watch for brochures and newspaper announcements.

June 10-July 3, 2002 - Invitational WTWP reading-writing institute for K-12 teachers, all subject-matter areas, on the UT Martin campus. To request an application, call or write: WTWP, Department of English, UT Martin, Martin, TN 38238; FAX 731.587.7276; telephone: 731.587.7290 or 731.587.7300. Deadline for receipt of applications is late February 2002.

August 3, 2002 - “Week 1, Day 1: The First Day Of School and Beyond,” WTWP workshop for English and language arts teachers, K-12, at the Ag Center in Jackson, with opening presenter, Marilyn Kallet, poet and head of the creative writing program at The University of Tennessee at Knoxville, who is participating as part of the benefit reading series of the Associated Writing Programs.