

## THE RIGHT STUFF:

### Students' Scores Soar with Poetry

In the 15 years since Border Voices was founded (in Feb. 1993) the project has collected plenty of anecdotes testifying to its beneficial impact on San Diego families.

Teachers have told us, with amazed pride, of newly inspired young people “writing, writing, writing” following a visit by a Border Voices poet. Parents share gratitude for the unexpected. As one father said, “you have transformed not only our daughter, but our whole family.”

The reasons for these continuing frissons of joy are many, but one fundamental or root cause stands out: writing poetry is an act of meditation, very similar to prayer. It calms and focuses the mind, enriches the student, and thus promotes success both inwardly and outwardly.

To put it that way, of course, makes a fondness for poetry sound like a sort of faith –

and there IS an element of faith involved. It is the faith of poets and teachers, an enduring faith that the human spirit is capable of remarkable things if given the right tools. And we have long believed (we poets and teachers) that poetry is one of the most important tools for integrating and actualizing young people’s artistic ability, self-understanding and delight in life...

It is helpful, of course, if such faith is supported by the “miracle” of hard data. And now we have that data, thanks to a \$20,000 grant from the California Arts Council.

Using that grant, Border Voices conducted poetry workshops in every classroom at Pershing Middle School in Spring 2002, with pre- and follow-up testing of the students. The principal, Sarah Sullivan, reported “huge and continuing increases in

scores on standardized English tests” even after the intensive school-wide workshops ended, and even among students who entered the school after Spring 2002. She attributed the continuing increases, in part, to teachers adopting Border Voices methods of presenting creative writing, and she also said the

workshops resulted in a new collegiality among the faculty and a campus-wide “educational Renaissance.”

This is good stuff. Equally delightful is the following table, which shows how Border Voices affected the entire student body:

**All Pershing Students, Spring 2001-2004**  
**Percentage of School’s Students at Each Performance Level**

**English Language Arts**

Year	Far Below		Basic Below		Basic		Proficient		Advanced	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
<b>2004</b>	44	4.9	135	14.9	323	35.7	271	30	131	14.5
<b>2003</b>	84	8.7	132	13.7	320	33.3	305	31.7	120	12.5
<b>2002</b>	92	10.0	152	16.5	338	36.8	256	27.9	81	8.8
<b>2001</b>	93	10.0	151	16.2	352	37.7	259	27.8	78	8.4

Note how the number of students performing at advanced levels on the test increased from 8.4% of the student body before the workshops to 14.5% by 2004. Note a corresponding drop in those scoring below basic, or far below basic. Sarah Sullivan, the school principal, attributes the continuing increases in scores, in part, to teachers adopting Border Voices methods of presenting creative

writing. She also said the workshops resulted in a new collegiality among the faculty, which in turn engendered the campus-wide educational Renaissance referred to above . . .

We rejoice. And unlike T.S. Eliot – who had to “construct something / Upon which to rejoice” – we really DO have something to be happy about. – **Jack Webb**