

WHAT YOUR COLLEAGUES ARE SAYING . . .

Beginning a career in teaching can be overwhelming—Melanie Meehan answers some of the most common questions writing teachers are tackling with a thoughtful approach for turning research into practice in every elementary classroom and empowering early career educators.

—**Paula Bourque**

Author of *Spark! Quick Writes to Kindle Hearts and Minds in Elementary Classrooms* and *Close Writing: Developing Purposeful Writers in Grades 2–6*

We learn best from each other, and Melanie Meehan does a phenomenal job of emphasizing how writers of all ages grow and learn from constructive criticism, feedback, and thoughtful responders. This is how we learn the importance of a growth mindset and learning how to make connections to our communities and the world around us. Teachers of all years and walks of life will walk away empowered and ready to grow their students across the curriculum.

—**Darius Phelps**

GAEYC 2016 Childcare Giver of the Year, Educator, Writer, Poet, and Illustrator

New teachers or new-to-workshop teachers will *hugely* benefit from this text. It gives a high-level overview of strong teaching practices—each supported with examples—and it gives a strong foundation for building a practice that’s responsive to students’ growth and learning while also being instructionally strong.

—**Katie McGrath**

Instructional Facilitator
Loudoun County Public Schools

Melanie Meehan masterfully weaves together relevant research, classroom examples, and her own experience as a writing mentor, coach, and teacher to paint a picture of the teaching of writing with students at the center. This is the book I wish I had as a new teacher and one I will turn to again and again in mentoring teachers who are new to writing or who want to develop a more meaningful writing instructional practice in their classrooms.

—**Christina Nosek**

Classroom Teacher and Author

In this not-to-be-missed guide to all-things-writing-workshop, Melanie Meehan thoughtfully shares ideas for creating a classroom community, what to teach writers, different methods of instruction, how to use assessment to move students forward, and ways to help students develop agency as writers and learners. *Answers to Your Biggest Questions About Teaching Elementary Writing* is a book teachers will turn to again and again for guidance, wisdom, tips, tools, and strategies for helping students develop as writers.

—**Kathleen Neagle Sokolowski**

Third-Grade Teacher

Melanie Meehan emphasizes that building a supportive community of writers starts with teachers who write, as this creates a more responsive and reflective teacher who is ready to support a variety of writing needs. *Answers to Your Biggest Questions About Teaching Elementary Writing* will leave teachers feeling like they are writers. In turn, the students in front of them will share in honoring, reflecting, and cherishing their identity as writers, too.

—Allie Woodruff

First-Grade Classroom Teacher

Answers to Your Biggest Questions About Teaching Elementary Writing is not a book about finding what is wrong in student writing and correcting it; this is a book about using every avenue possible—whole group instruction, small group instruction, partner work, charts, thoughtful language (to name just a few!)—to discover all that students know and are able to do, and to invite them into co-crafting the instruction that matches their goals and their aspirations. Not satisfied with dreaming about the kind of writing instruction every child deserves, Melanie Meehan has written the book that maps out how to become a writing teacher worthy of the children we are privileged to teach.

—Shana Frazin

Co-Author, *Unlocking the Power of Classroom Talk*

ANSWERS *to Your*

BIGGEST QUESTIONS *About*

TEACHING
ELEMENTARY
WRITING

This book is dedicated to every teacher who wonders, reflects, and commits to teaching children how to tell their stories and share their wisdom.

FIVE to
THRIVE

ANSWERS *to Your*

BIGGEST QUESTIONS *About*

TEACHING
ELEMENTARY
WRITING

Melanie Meehan

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Visit the companion website at
resources.corwin.com/answerselementarywriting
for additional resources.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Melanie Meehan has been the elementary writing and social studies coordinator in Simsbury, Connecticut, since 2012. Within that position, she writes curriculum, works with teachers, and strives to send students off into the world as confident writers who love to express their ideas. Melanie is a co-author of *Two Writing Teachers*, a blog dedicated to the teaching of writing, as well as a regular contributor to *Choice Literacy*. She wrote *Every Child Can Write*, which was published by Corwin Press in October 2019, and she co-authored *The Responsive Writing Teacher* with Kelsey Sorum, which was published in 2021. You can reach Melanie on Twitter, @MelanieMeehan1.



My teaching career began at an on-grounds school for children who had been removed from their homes for a variety of reasons. Many of the children harbored anger and grief due to the trauma they'd experienced. My co-teacher, Anne, and I knew writing could become an outlet, but we weren't sure how to structure meaningful writing instruction as the authentic communication form it could be. In search of ideas and inspiration, we attended a weeklong workshop that introduced us to many of the principles that have stayed with me throughout my teaching career. Writers have many specific, personal needs—cookies, coffee, a particular chair. However, the following core beliefs about writers' *fundamental* needs have not changed much, and they have anchored my thinking, approach, and action whenever I am working with or for students.

CORE BELIEFS ABOUT WRITERS' NEEDS

BELIEF 1: WRITERS NEED CHOICE

Our leaders emphasized the importance of choice, beginning even with the notebooks and pens we used. I spent time in a local store selecting a notebook that I still have today. It has no lines, thick paper, and a spiral binding so it can lie flat on either side. This notebook remains my favorite of all my notebooks, and I still bring it into classrooms for demonstration lessons. My favorite pens were felt, but with a fine tip and the ability to write smoothly, and I loved having different colors. Whenever I work with students, regardless of age and writing experiences, I provide options for pens, and I'm always amazed at how a new pen can jump-start a writer!

Choices exist in many aspects of writing, but perhaps the most important encompasses topic. During the workshop, our presenters continued to provide choice about how we thought of topics and what we wrote. Topic choice was critical for us, and it is critical for students who are discovering meaningful moments and topics for themselves. With time to explore, we came up with what mattered to us without knowing at the onset. We needed that time, though, because it allowed us to explore different topics and find patterns or themes for ourselves. We made lists, wrote off favorite quotes, and found passages we liked and tried to emulate them. These processes led to discovery and authentic topics. Just as the adults in my workshop wrote to discover, students also benefit from these processes.

BELIEF 2: WRITERS NEED TEACHERS WHO WRITE

During that weeklong writing workshop, the presenters intentionally provided time for participants to write. “You need to experience how it feels to do the work,” they said. Since then, I have heard many other presenters say similar things: *Spy on yourself. Think about the thought processes you are engaging and the cognitive work you are doing, since that’s what students will be experiencing as well.*

In a report published for the Department of Education, Graham (2012) provides several recommendations about writing instruction for students, asserting that students need to feel a sense of community as writers. The teacher is the lead learner, and if you’re not writing, then you’re missing out on a key element of building that community.

In addition to creating the community, teachers who write understand the synergy and pitfalls of writing. During my weeklong workshop, *we wrote*. My own personal life as a writer has become the most important element of my writing instruction. Donald Graves (n.d.b), a master teacher of writing and an important contributor in the field of research about writing instruction, said, “You can’t ask someone to sing a duet with you until you know the tune yourself.”

“I’m not a writer” is a phrase I hear often from teachers, and I understand why anyone would say it. I’ve written countless blog posts, a few novels (still unpublished), and a couple of professional books, and I still have moments when I feel like I can’t write and I’m not a writer. Furthermore, writing is different from reading because if there’s a book that’s not engaging me, I can pick up a different one. There are times as a writer when I just can’t get going.

But eventually, I do.

And it’s in those places and spaces of feeling like I’m not a writer that I learn the most about how to teach writing.

BELIEF 3: WRITERS NEED TIME TO WRITE

Many writers will tell you that the secret to writing is ... writing. Stephen King is quoted as saying that if you want to be a good writer, you must do two things: read a lot and write a lot. He has written several novels, as well as one of my favorite books about writing, *On Writing. If Stephen King* needs time to write, then so do I. And so do students!

Whenever I talk or write about writing instruction, I find myself using analogies, and many of them involve sports. In any sport, practice is necessary. Expanding the idea of practice, it’s necessary for any pursuit or activity. In a different study, another one of Graham et al.’s (2018) key recommendations for effective writing instruction involves providing *daily* time for students to write with time allocated for explicit instruction, as well as independent application. Graves also emphasized the importance of time spent writing. According to Graves, at least four days per week of time dedicated to writing instruction is necessary for students to enjoy writing and contribute to their personal development as learners (Graves, n.d.a).

BELIEF 4: WRITERS NEED A COMMUNITY

Teachers who write set the stage for a writing community, but a community also consists of co-learners and thoughtful responders. I love to listen to students

collaborate about their pieces; sometimes they co-create, and other times they respond with questions, compliments, and suggestions. Writing can be an act of vulnerability, since not every writer knows what to say, how to say it, and what the response could be. While there are a variety of potential audiences for writers, a community provides an organic first audience, and with supports and structures, that community can become a place where writers take risks, experimenting, analyzing, and celebrating the power of their written pieces.

These beliefs rest on the shoulders and thinking of many leaders in the education field who have shaped my development as a writing teacher, and at some point, I may change or add to them. However, I keep coming back to these four beliefs time and time again, year after year.

WHY IS TEACHING WRITING DIFFERENT TODAY?

Before thinking about the differences between teaching writing today and at any other time, it's important to remember that the goal of writing instruction, regardless of time frame and context, is to empower students to use language with precision and flexibility so that they can communicate their ideas, beliefs, knowledge, and stories. That purpose has not changed, and I don't foresee it ever changing. The ability to communicate empowers everyone across the domains of their lives—personally, emotionally, professionally, and civically. Keeping that goal as a beacon and north star clarifies how to analyze and select the strategies, resources, and technology that evolve and are invented in a rapidly changing environment.

Returning to Graham's recommendations, teaching students to become fluent with handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, typing, and word processing are critical. With less cognitive demand required for basic writing skills, students can use more energy for creating and developing ideas. Perhaps more than any other impact, the availability and wide usage of technology have changed the teaching of writing because technology has the power to make some of those basic writing skills more accessible to students. For example, let's think about revision and how it relates to teaching writing in today's classrooms. Young students may need paper strips to add ideas or you may need to teach them how to use asterisks and arrows, but once students learn to use a keyboard, revision can happen without the worry of where to fit it in.

I graduated from high school in the mid-eighties, and my graduation present was a typewriter that could delete several characters that I didn't want. Even so, I didn't like using that function because the erasing tape was so expensive! Before the typewriter, my father used to read my handwritten high school essays in the morning. (To this day, I do not know what possessed me to show him those essays since some of the biggest fights I can remember happened because he used a pen on my final copy.) I didn't even always agree with what he perceived as mistakes. I allowed myself only one to two corrections per page, so at the least, my father's corrections meant I'd have to rewrite the entire page and possibly more. I often wonder how those mornings would have gone if we could have copied, pasted, and deleted text without having to redo the entire piece.

The idea of revising a writing piece may not overwhelm writers as much when change doesn't involve rewriting pages by hand, and that's a good thing. However, as is the case with so much technology, there's another not-so-positive side. Revising within an online platform means the writer's process becomes less visible.

When students cross out, add asterisks and carats, and write in margins or at different parts of paper pages, their thinking and their process has a trail; many times it's easier to teach when that sort of trail exists. Because of the less visible trail on devices, students' understanding and ability to verbalize their steps, strengths, and struggles as writers are even more important so they can share them with teachers, and instruction can be more targeted on what is helpful for students.

Final products are important for writing, and in this book, you will read about the tension between process and product, an important distinction for writing teachers to consider throughout their work with students. Word processing has impacted the products that students are able to create, and using a keyboard or a device facilitates the creation of an easier-to-read end piece that looks more like texts students are accustomed to reading (MacArthur, 2000). However, when the emphasis is on a product and not on the learning that happens along the way, students may become intimidated by the process of writing itself. There is a constant balance that teeters and shifts of nudging students to learn and develop, as opposed to pushing students to create a piece of writing that goes out into the world and can be easily and respectfully accessed by an audience. A way to find the balance when you find yourself teetering is to remember that not all pieces need to be all things.

TECHNOLOGY HAS CHANGED THE STUDENT WRITING EXPERIENCE

The basic premise of writing to communicate ideas was true before the influx of computers and digital opportunities, and it remains true today. However, as computers and devices become more and more available to students, writing instruction has changed. At this time, the evidence is mixed regarding whether student writing improves based on the platform of pen to paper or keyboarding (Spilling et al., 2021), and it could be that the answer varies from student to student. The important thing to realize is that writing involves the integration of many attributes and skills, from physical strength to fine motor to extensive cognitive ones.

When I work with young writers, writers who are still using paper and haven't yet learned to keyboard, I teach them early on not to erase. "Just use a single line to cross out," I tell them. That way, they spend less time erasing and writing, erasing and writing, and also, I have access to their process as writers. What decisions did they make about revision? What did they change and why?

The trail that these young writers leave provides me with insights into their process as writers, and those understandings help me teach them more effectively. Online mediums and digital platforms complicate this process. I can ask students to track changes, and with some digital platforms, I can see a history of revisions. I can coach students to ignore computer-based suggestions and potentially distracting red lines, but I can't see the process the way I can when it's on paper, and I can't always know that students aren't distracted by technology's attempts to be helpful. As is the case with so many things in both writing instruction and life, there's a balance to find between how technology helps and how it hinders. Instruction may

sometimes focus on when it's easier for students to create on paper as opposed to on a screen. At what point should a piece be printed as a hard copy and suggestions made in the margin with a pen? Those answers will differ from student to student and from piece to piece, and the search for these answers adds to the complexity of writing instruction.

In addition to facilitating the revision process, technology offers many alternatives to the accurate spelling of words. Spellcheck programs have gotten better and better, which also has pros and cons when it comes to writing instruction. On the one hand, this automation potentially allows students to pay more attention to the content of their work, as opposed to mechanics that are more easily corrected by a teacher or other reader. On the other hand, at what point should students know how to spell high-frequency words? Today's writing instruction requires teachers to contemplate that balance constantly. There are a few words that I always struggle to spell (parallelism, embarrassment, parentheses), and I am grateful for the red lines that indicate there's a problem or even the instant correction. However, if those corrections happened constantly, my ability to concentrate on content and composition would decrease because of the distractions.

Dictation is another complication for current writing instruction. "Use talk to text" is a suggestion I hear in many intervention meetings. Yes, many students can talk faster than they write, and they have access to programs and apps that can transcribe their words. However, as a friend who bakes amazing cookies reminds me, the product will be only as good as the ingredients. If you're putting not-good stuff in, you'll get not-good stuff out. Dictation has the potential to frustrate many students because they might not be able to speak clearly, they might not initiate the process with organized thoughts, or they might not consider the conventions and punctuation their writing needs to include to be created for users to access and read.

One of my yoga teacher's mantras is that not every body is everybody. I like to transfer that to writing instruction: Not every writer needs the same skills, lesson, or focus. Maybe one student struggles with letter formation but has no problem finding letters on a keyboard; that student may well compose more effectively using a device. Technology has the power to provide access and pathways for some students that were nonexistent before the wide use and availability of computers and personal devices. These discrepancies, differences, and decisions impact writing instruction.

Within all these concepts, these questions remain at the heart of writing instruction: How well are students able to communicate their ideas? Can they do it independently? Are the tools that are available to them in classrooms also available to them outside of the classrooms? Will the instruction and system you offer them help or hinder them in the future? No matter when you read this book, no matter what technology is available in the world and in your classroom, hold on to your key beliefs about your end goals for students as writers. You want to empower those students to communicate their ideas with the world, and every tool, resource, and strategy should aim at that ultimate goal.

How Does Writing Instruction Overlap With Universal Design for Learning (UDL)?

Given the development of technology and the continuing research that exists about learning, more possibilities exist for writers, as well as more knowledge about how the process develops. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides guidelines with a set of concrete suggestions for any discipline or domain that “ensure that all learners can access and participate in meaningful, challenging learning opportunities” (CAST, n.d.). Within three broad categories of engagement, representation, and action and expression, UDL provides guidelines for the why, what, and how of learning. These categories apply directly to writing instruction. As you read this book, consider the various reasons you provide for developing writers to create pieces. This consideration folds into one of my guiding beliefs about purpose and audience. Technology has expanded the possibilities for both what writers create and the tools and resources they have available for them.

While there is much more to know and understand about UDL—and I recommend spending time exploring and familiarizing yourself with UDL for all content areas—remembering the three pillars of engagement, representation, and action and expression is helpful for considering and creating modifications that open pathways for all writers in your classroom.

For more about UDL, go to cast.org.

EQUITY MUST BE AT THE CENTER

Graham’s recommendations, combined with UDL and a clear belief set, create a trajectory aimed at equity, critical in every aspect of curriculum and instruction. Throughout this book, when I address equity, I lean on the definition and description created by the National Equity Project (n.d.): *Educational equity means that each child receives what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential.*

Because the process of writing is complex, requiring both precursive skills and the integration of developing ones, instruction is complex, and there are many ways to provide it so that everyone meets their potential. In *The Responsive Writing Teacher*, Kelsey Sorum and I (2021) present four domains to consider across all components of writing instruction: academic, linguistic, cultural, and social-emotional. Knowing the writers in your classroom across each domain will help you plan for and provide equitable instruction.

When considering the academic domain, it is critical to gather information, plan, and provide resources for where students are functioning when it comes to skills and knowledge. Teaching concepts that require extensive scaffolding and support reinforces students’ belief that writing is beyond their realm of possibility, a message that does not lead to meeting academic potential. Rigorous curriculum and high expectations must be combined with pathways of possibilities and embedded experiences for success and agency.

Linguistic responsiveness is the second domain for writing teachers to pay close attention to. As Ludwig Wittgenstein (1921/2010), an Austrian philosopher, wrote,

“the limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” In other words, students’ abilities to process and produce language impact their writing ability, and how we plan and provide for language development helps or hinders students from meeting their full potential.

Just as it’s possible to respond to and act on students’ academic and linguistic abilities, understanding and responding to cultural and social-emotional aspects of their lives send strong messages regarding what you value about them. Additionally, deepening your understanding of who students are, what matters to them, and how they learn opens possibilities for topics, learning pathways, and environmental priorities. All these factors expand the trajectory of meeting potential, both academically and socially.

Zaretta Hammond (2021) expands the concept of equity with three distinct dimensions of equity. She distinguishes between *multicultural education* with a focus on celebrating diversity; *social justice education*, which exposes the experiences of the social-political contexts of students; and *culturally responsive education*, which improves the learning capacity of historically marginalized students. Writing instruction has the power to provide straightforward access to multiculturalism and social justice by providing students with a range of mentor texts and choices of topics that have personal meaning for them. Furthermore, writing is a mechanism for activism and social justice. The more students understand, learn, and utilize the power of writing to create differences in the world, the more engagement, purpose, and passion they will have for their own agency and process.

The more impactful differences on students’ learning and achievement when it comes to equity are entangled within students’ ability to accept and embrace agency and self-directed learning. The trajectory of this book moves from the consideration of your environment to the curriculum to instruction and assessment, so that in the final chapter, you can grapple with how all those components can work together beneath the all-important umbrella of student agency. As your emphasis shifts to student-directedness and agency, so does students’ ability to improve their own cognitive development and writing skills. As Hammond (2021) writes, “Our ultimate goal is to design learning so students become self-aware and self-directed as learners. Then they can grow their smarts and expand their intellectual capacity.” It is this expansion that leads to high levels of learning for all students—the ultimate goal of equity in education.

HOW DOES THIS BOOK HELP?

The five chapters of this book encompass the environment, the curriculum, instructional practices, assessment, and ways to provide agency to students. Curating many of the questions I have heard during my time as a writing teacher and specialist, I have created questions that aim at those topics. Sometimes my own writing and teaching experiences have helped me answer them, sometimes I’ve talked to colleagues I admire, and other times I’ve culled through research. The overarching questions, which serve as chapter titles, are as follows:

- 1 How Do I Build and Maintain a Writing Community?
- 2 What Should Students Know and Be Able to Do as Writers?
- 3 What Are Key Instructional Practices to Know and Use?
- 4 How Do I Use Assessment for Students’ Benefit?
- 5 How Do I Shift Agency From Teacher to Students in the Writing Classroom?

These questions aim to address the instructional core—curriculum, instruction, and assessment—while providing equity and agency for all students. You will find sidebar notes throughout the text that provide explanations and windows into my interior debates and decision-making as I work with writers. You will also find lists of additional resources because this book is designed to help you get going and then check in with yourself.

The body of work about writing instruction is enormous, and people contribute to it daily. I am grateful for the ideas and contributions of the many educators in my own district who grapple and reflect to inspire students to write. My colleagues at Two Writing Teachers also influence my understanding of how to teach writing well. And all our work stands on the shoulders of great writing instructors, including Donald Graves, Steve Graham, Lucy Calkins, Ruth Culham, Frank Smith, Zaretta Hammond, and many more.

WHOM IS THIS BOOK FOR?

While I hope this book helps anyone new to teaching writing, I also hope that it helps *anyone* who would like more confidence in teaching writing! Various programs exist, whether they are unit-based, workshop-based, or based on purchased scripts and resources. Across the country, students experience a wide variety of curriculum, instruction, lessons, activities, and experiences when it comes to writing instruction. Ultimately, the goal of any writing instruction, though, should be to develop students who can identify and communicate their ideas, stories, and knowledge. If you work with students who are at any stage of their writing lives, you may find resources and strategies in this book that inspire you.

The challenge of distilling practices into five prioritized ideas has led to the clear articulation of what has worked for me over the years of teaching writing to elementary students. At times, you may find overlap or redundancy, and that may be because writing instruction is recursive and nonlinear. Each of the first four chapters builds to the fifth chapter, where the focus is on the key shift from teacher-driven learning to student-driven learning. Research shows that the more students develop agency for themselves as writers, the higher the rates of growth and learning you're likely to see (Zeiser, Scholz, & Cirks, 2018).

If you are a teacher in the early part of your career using this book as you develop your practices, you may find satisfaction and inspiration in thinking about how you set up your systems and structures, what you teach, how you teach, how you measure, and how you empower and center students.

More experienced teachers may find in this book validation for your practices. You may also find the language or explanation to clarify practices for others who work with you, co-teaching or supporting writers in their classrooms. It could be that the fifth chapter, which focuses on agency, is a starting place for experienced teachers who are looking to provide more opportunities for students to take charge of their own learning.

For those of you who observe and evaluate writing instruction, this book can provide look-fors and listen-fors. It may help you sharpen your lens for noticing environments that support learners, and maybe you'll find opportunities for providing feedback that builds confidence and grows practice. Classroom teachers

face a wide range of writers, and the more you can offer ideas about instructional strategies, the better for all those writers.

Writing coaches and district curriculum specialists can use this book to develop common vocabulary and practices within the classrooms you support. You may also consider how to communicate classroom instructional practices that meet the various needs and learning opportunities for the wide variety of writers in classrooms, ideas that comprise Chapter 3. Many opportunities exist for assessment in writing classrooms, and maybe Chapter 4 becomes a focus area when meetings arise for individual students of concern.

HOW SHOULD YOU USE THIS BOOK?

In my experience, the most effective teachers of writing are in a constant state of reflection and development. Their lessons are never the same, their strategies evolve, and their resources reflect and respond to the students who are in their classrooms. Just as the writing process is not linear, neither is writing instruction. And this book honors that nonlinear process!

Writing is recursive, or looped in a way that allows each phase of writing to repeat. Meehan and Sorum (2021) share their writing processes in *The Responsive Writing Teacher*, showing and explaining how writers move back and forth between steps within their writing processes. Each step feeds into another step, possibly one that has already been experienced with the same writing piece. Drafting may lead to the need for more research and fact-finding. Revision may send writers back to reconsider their plan. Just as the writing process is recursive, so is writing instruction. As you learn and weave new practices and ideas into your practice, you may want to return to other related practices and ideas as well. Use this book in a way that brings you back to the particular point you need at the time you need it.

Maybe you'll want to read this book cover to cover the first time. If you do, think about the flow as setting up to teach, figuring out what to teach and how to teach it, and then taking into consideration how to know that students are learning and benefiting from your instruction. Throughout it all, continue to ask yourself, how do I promote student agency?

Or maybe you'll think to yourself, *okay, I'm getting the idea of instructional practices, so how can I make sure my environment supports them?* With that question, you might want to return to Chapter 1.

And maybe you're feeling like all the parts are coming together, and you want to work on shifting agency in your writing classroom. In that case, start with Chapter 5.

Because the book centers on questions, you might find questions you have or didn't know you have but have now—exploring some of those answers and explanations is another way you might use this book.

My hope is that this book becomes a coach by your side as you develop your own practice of writing instruction. No matter where you are in that practice, there's room to reflect and grow, especially as resources and technology continue to evolve and improve the opportunities for students to learn.