

# Introduction

## Background

In 1996, I arrived in Las Vegas and two days later was teaching English at John C. Fremont Middle School, an inner-city campus situated between the Las Vegas Strip and downtown's Glitter Gulch. Like me, many of my sixth-graders were new to the city. They and their families had come to Las Vegas from Central and South America, Mexico, Eastern Europe, the Pacific Islands, Asia, and from cities all around the United States.

Urban Las Vegas, to these families, represented a starting-out point, a place to make new beginnings and to work at making dreams become realities. The city's immense service industry had job openings waiting for anyone willing to work. For the most part, these were low-level positions with long hours and strong physical demands. Since Las Vegas operates around the clock, seven days a week, parents, I quickly found out, were as likely to work the swing or graveyard shift as they were to have nine-to-five jobs.

Just as with a tourist's long-shot hopes at winning a big jackpot, much of Vegas' promise remains tantalizingly out of reach for new immigrants to the city, who find themselves stuck in low-end positions, struggling with multiple jobs without the education or language skills it takes to move up the ladder. At our school, the transient rate has passed sixty percent (the highest rate in the entire Clark County School District), a figure that reflects the searching and dream chasing that new families in Las Vegas' inner city undergo as a rite of passage.

Even in my first year at Fremont Middle School, I began to wonder if it would be possible to work directly with the families. A familiar chorus among some of my peers in those days was that it was nearly impossible to get parents involved in their children's educations. I hoped that parents would become more visible around our school if invited for reasons other than discipline conferences with counselors and deans. Our parents, I already knew, work hard and have full schedules. I guessed that in order to increase parental involvement at school we would have to develop some opportunities that were not threatening or directly connected to their children's academic day and which held some intrinsic rewards for the parents.

My most successful writing lessons in the classroom were those that gave my sixth-graders the chance to write about their lives, about their own experiences. These students' autobiographical narratives always resonated with powerful voices and

compelling content. I had the strong suspicion that, given the chance, their parents would produce equally great writing of their own.

Besides my interest in exploring what sorts of writings the parents and children together would create, I really wanted the families to empower themselves through writing. I wanted to offer them a chance to punch an opening in the standard school setting and together say, loud enough for anyone to hear, “We are here, this is what we think, and we hope you listen.” Voice and identity filled the community around my school, but I did not feel that those voices found many opportunities to be heard.

Occasionally our immediate community gained attention when a crime was committed or standardized test scores fell below average. Those stories just did not tell what, based on my experiences with my students and their families, I knew deserved to be told. To tell the truth, I found myself angry at the selective picture painted of my school and neighborhood. I wanted to see the families write about their own lives, in their own voices, and make those stories available to our surrounding community. I decided to start a Family Writing Project.

Early in my fourth year at the school, I brought my idea of creating a Family Writing Project to Dennis Goode, co-director of the Southern Nevada Writing Project. He immediately pushed me to bring the idea to Rosemary Holmes-Gull, Southern Nevada Writing Project’s amazing director, who all but ordered me to create a proposal and a budget. Dennis and Rosemary saw the worth of my idea and would not let me back down. Their encouragement and commitment to my idealistic dreams pushed me to turn those dreams into something real, something that works.

At the same time, the City of Las Vegas began a neighborhood-based grant program, the Youth Neighborhood Association Partnership Program. Just as Rosemary and Dennis had seen the value in writing with families, the City of Las Vegas recognized that such collaboration between teachers, parents, and students would strengthen and enrich the city. Urban life, particularly in a city as varied and fast-paced as Las Vegas, too often severs lines of communication, making it difficult to generate a meaningful sense of community. We asked for a grant from the program and received \$1,000 in 2001. That grant, and the ones the city has awarded us in subsequent years, validated our time together and reminded us to keep our project community-based, with real, visible benefits arising from our project for our surrounding neighborhood and its families, many of whom send children to the school.

I founded the Fremont Family Writing Project with families of students at John C. Fremont Middle School in urban Las Vegas, where I live and teach. Since then,

teacher facilitators have begun Family Writing Groups with families around the city as well as across the country. All have used our initial work in Las Vegas as their starting model.

Our Fremont Family Writing Project took off quickly. Before we knew it, we grew not only in size but also in terms of the scope of our work. In this book, I explain how to facilitate the group at the heart of every Family Writing Project, which is the Family Scribe Group. We do have other activities organized under the umbrella term of Family Writing Project. For instance, some Family Writing Projects host after-school writing programs, which we call the After School Scribes, or organize community Family Writing Fairs. These efforts, along with Family Scribe Groups, can collectively form a Family Writing Project. The Family Scribe Group, however, is always the most important part of any Family Writing Project. Everything else centers on the Family Scribes. Most Family Writing Projects organize Family Scribe Groups without ever tackling these other activities. For more information about aspects of Family Writing Projects beyond Family Scribes, visit the Family Writing Project website at [www.FamilyWritingProjects.com](http://www.FamilyWritingProjects.com). In this book, the concern is solely with Family Scribe Groups.

Whether you are a teacher, counselor, social worker, church member, or some other professional who teaches writing or works with families, you will find that *Writing with Families* gives you everything you need to know in order to establish your own Family Scribe Group. This book will show you how to facilitate Scribe Groups that create writers, involve families, benefit communities, and inspire you in your role as facilitator.

Family Scribe Groups offer families the rare opportunity to come together and create a community of writers. Participants in these groups discuss ideas and issues that are important to them. They work together on activities, write extensively, and respond to each other's work. Many participants say that this experience changes their lives. Through Family Scribe Groups, children and adults gain leadership skills, find their personal voices, gain empowerment in their communities and schools, and become creators of a strong school–family connection.

This book is written for teachers and others who want to impact their schools and communities while growing professionally. For facilitators of Family Scribe Groups, the experience often affirms their professional goals. Teachers who lead Scribe Groups see that they can reach students; they exercise creativity and enjoy a level of autonomy that often does not exist in school systems. Without exception, all of the facilitators of Scribe Groups I speak with tell me that working with families on writing is one of the most inspiring and energizing

experiences they have had as teachers. In fact, many say that facilitating Scribe Groups has kept them in the teaching profession.

School teachers are not the only ones who have used the ideas in this book to create something new and vibrant at their sites. Because of the community-oriented nature of Family Scribe Groups, the ideas and lessons presented here have worked in settings far removed from public schools, such as churches and parks and recreation departments. I have met family counselors who have told me that they hope this work reaches their colleagues because of the ways in which family writing, as a consequence of the communications it fosters, can influence the dynamics of family relationships.

*Writing with Families* gives facilitators a usable guide to designing and leading Family Scribe Groups. In this book, there is not only a detailed description of a five-week Family Scribe Group program that readers can adapt to their own needs and situations but also many more ideas for themes and activities that might be used in creating Family Scribe Groups. These ideas have been successfully adapted at sites across the nation.

## **How to Use This Book**

**Chapter 1** explains exactly what a Family Scribe Group is: how it works, whom it is for, and what it entails. It also gives eleven founding principles of Scribe Groups. Remember and follow these, and you will almost certainly facilitate a rewarding, fun, and exciting Family Scribe Group.

**Chapter 2** offers thirteen steps in chronological order for preparing for your Family Scribe Group. Follow this checklist, and you should have everything you need to begin your first group.

**Chapters 3-7** follow five weeks' worth of meetings in the life of a Family Scribe Group. These meetings can be spread out over a semester, a year, or whatever time frame works best for your group.

**Chapter 8** suggests twenty-five different culminating projects that families might undertake to finish their work and recounts culminating projects the Fremont Family Scribe Group has undertaken in Las Vegas.

**Chapter 9** provides a wealth of suggestions for themes and activities to use in designing your own Family Scribe Group.

**Chapter 10** concludes the book by detailing the many benefits of Family Scribe Groups for students, families, teachers/facilitators, and communities. This chapter provides specific reasons why teachers would want to involve their families with this unique approach to writing and community-building on school campuses.

Finally, the **Facilitators' Resources** section is divided into five parts:

- “Benefits for Administrators” discusses the specific reasons why administrators will want to support Family Scribe Groups in their schools.
- “Sample Project” provides a sample five-week project plan, incorporating some of the themes and activities from **Chapter 9**, to follow or adapt.
- “Frequently Asked Questions” lists questions commonly posed to me at workshops and conferences over the years by teachers and others interested in Family Scribe Groups. My answers come directly from my experiences leading Family Scribe Groups and helping others to do so themselves. This is an excellent place to look for answers either before or after reading the rest of the book.
- “In Their Own Words: Facilitators Speak” highlights comments from experienced Family Scribe Group facilitators who relate how projects have benefited both them as professionals and their school sites. This section offers numerous anecdotes from diverse leaders, providing important peer feedback to those thinking about starting their own Scribe Groups.
- “Templates” includes project evaluation forms, assignment sheets, a release form, and other forms for facilitators to use, either directly from the book or as guides in designing their own forms.

I believe that, after reading *Writing with Families*, you will have a clear understanding of what a Family Scribe Group can mean to your site. You will have all the tools and ideas you need to guide and facilitate families through the process of becoming writers. Most importantly, you will feel the desire to become involved yourself.