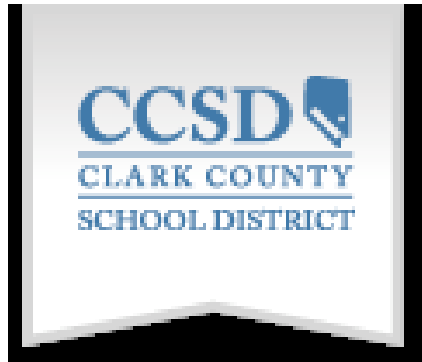


Writing That Makes A Difference

Just Voices





THE PUBLIC EDUCATION FOUNDATION



Just Voices

I. Overview

American education, at its best, has promised to provide schools that foster student engagement, spark intellectual curiosity, and inspire independent thinking; this project provides an opportunity for community leaders, in collaboration with the Clark County School District (CCSD), the Nevada System of Higher Education, The Public Education Foundation, and the Nevada Partnership for Inclusive Education (Nevada PIE), to help keep the promise by sponsoring a cutting edge literary curriculum resource – *Just Voices*. ***Just Voices* is an effort to introduce all students to the realm of writing that makes a difference.** Using inclusive educational practices, it impacts approx. 1,200 high school students throughout Southern Nevada each year. Many of these students are precariously balancing between falling through the cracks of our educational system or receiving the motivational nudge they need to graduate and succeed. *Just Voices* is a buoy for the student who is considering dropping out or is “on the cusp” educationally. Moreover, it is providing expanded learning opportunities to the broad spectrum of students, thus enriching their lives.

Bringing world-class writers into our schools - to share their stories and interact with students - is a key component of this curriculum resource, and it is inspiring teachers and students alike to fulfill their true potential. By exposing students to “writers of conscience” from around the world, who have told the truth about the harsh and restrictive systems in which they lived, who have made their voices heard across the continents through their pens, who have cared enough about injustice to risk personal harm by refusing to be silent, we are helping students find *their* voices. *Just Voices* brings the global community to our youth, provides a way to be heard, and promises them hope for a meaningful future.

Just Voices is enhancing the literacy of high school students by engaging them in writing about social issues that are important to them. It not only features literature that grapples with issues of social justice, but also, it asks that our students *write* about issues of social justice. Our objective is to raise curiosity and interest in literature and the realization among students that effective writing skills can be a powerful tool toward making a positive impact on the world. **Ultimately, more students are being awakened to a greater world, increasing their motivation to stay in school and graduate.** In addition, by providing participating teachers with enhanced opportunities for professional development they are being inspired to teach students to write at a higher level, and they are motivated to share their excitement and enthusiasm with new students each year. In fact, the program is designed to live on for many years to come, affecting countless numbers of teachers and students.

II. Project Description

A. Purpose of Proposed Project: The purpose of *Just Voices* is to enhance the literacy of our students, in order to positively impact their lives, and make the world a better place in which to live.

Can writing change the world? A little pamphlet by Thomas Paine spoke to the American people of the 18th century and built strong support for a revolution...From the book, *1776*, by David McCullough, comes this **excerpt from one of General George Washington’s letters**...“*My countrymen, I know from their form of government and steady attachment heretofore to royalty, will come reluctantly into the idea of independence, but time and persecution brings many wonderful things to pass, and by private letters which I have lately received from Virginia, I find Common Sense is working a powerful change there in the minds of many men.*” *Just Voices* is an effort to introduce all students to the realm of writing that makes a difference. Are there any young Thomas Paines in Clark County? A dynamic group of leaders in our community is making sure that there are.

In December 2005, *Nevada PIE* brought together several divisions of the CCSD, including Curriculum & Professional Development, Student Support Services, and Educational Services; the Nevada System of Higher Education, including UNLV’s Colleges of Education and Liberal Arts, the Greenspun School of Journalism and Media Studies, the Boyd School of Law’s Academic Success Program, the International Institute of Modern Letters, and the College of Southern Nevada; the Southern Nevada Writing Project; the Southern Nevada Regional Professional Development Program (RPDP); CLASS! Publications; Words Without Borders*; teachers and members of the community to **develop a program that would teach students effective writing skills and enhance their overall literacy - *Just Voices***.

B. Elements of Plan: Specific elements of the plan are as follows:

1. Professional Development – Teachers can receive graduate level professional development via two courses.

The first course, created by the Southern Nevada Regional Professional Development Program (RPDP), is entitled “*Just Voices: Readers Writers Workshop*”. The course is designed to deepen teachers’ practice of literacy instruction, with a focus on inclusive strategies. For their participation, teachers receive two graduate-level credits, which can be applied toward salary advancement and/or re-licensure. Moreover, through their participation in the course, teachers learn how to implement these dynamic and engaging methods into their classrooms, using the *Just Voices* curriculum resources. Specifically, participants in the “*Just Voices: Readers Writers Workshop*” have the opportunity to:

- increase cultural literacy and create a community of writers who strive to heighten social justice and a tolerance for divergent thinking through critical analysis and interaction with a variety of reading and writing genres.
- develop workshop methodology to implement a reading/writing workshop in the secondary classroom;
 - use writing to understand, develop and explain personal experiences and professional practices,
 - explore what it means to be members of a writing community, and
 - develop an awareness of self as writer, reader and responder.
- develop a greater repertoire of classroom instructional strategies and resources for reading comprehension, literary analysis, critical thinking, and writing skills in correlation to CCSD curriculum and adopted texts or materials.

The second course, created by the Department of English at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) and RPDP, is entitled “*Just Voices: Writers-in-the-Schools*”. All *Just Voices* teachers are required to take this one-credit course that focuses on how to sensitively and effectively introduce the authors’ literature into the high school classroom.

2. Teacher Selection – We accept teachers who are committed to the program’s goals and purpose via a comprehensive application and approval process that has been developed specifically for the selection of *Just Voices* teachers.

* **Words Without Borders** undertakes to promote international communication through translation of the world’s best writing—selected and translated by a distinguished group of writers, translators, and publishing professionals—and publishing and promoting these works (or excerpts) on the web. WWB is in the process of developing “instant anthologies” and thematic curricula to be used in educational settings.

3. **School Implementation** – High School students in selected English and Social Studies classrooms have the opportunity to read, write, and discuss literature of social conscience, and teachers have the opportunity to enrich the curriculum by implementing thematic activities (around challenging topics such as censorship, democracy, ethics and the media, civil liberties, etc.). The format allows teachers to use a variety of research-based instructional methods to read and discuss the authors’ work in ways that are exciting and inspiring to the students. **Books and curriculum resources are made available to the participating students.** *Just Voices* is providing time for participants to create and reflect upon their own writing, and to respond to the writing of others, thus becoming fully engaged in the writing process.
4. **Writer/Student Interaction** – We are excited to share with you that **the following leading writers of social justice have participated over the last two years:**

Ertai Gao was born in China in 1935. A writer, painter, and art critic, Ertai was sent to a labor camp in 1957, after the publication of his essay “On Beauty” and other articles, in which he asserted—contrary to communist party ideology—that individual freedom is a necessity for creative artistic expression. In 1966, he was again sentenced to hard labor until 1972. He was officially exonerated of all “crimes” in 1978, and in 1985 was recognized by the National Science Council as a “State Expert with Distinguished Contributions.” He was imprisoned again in 1989, following the Tiananmen Square popular uprising for democracy, for “antirevolutionary writings.” After his release, he left China, and now lives in exile in Las Vegas, as a Cities of Asylum writer in residence. He has completed a three-volume memoir, *In Search of My Homeland*. Excerpts, “The Blue Jacket” and “Sunrise Over Barren Mountain” have garnered high acclaim.

Cristina García is one of the best-known Cuban-American writers today. García was born in Havana, Cuba, in 1958, and was brought as an exile to the United States at the age of 2, where she grew up in New York City, speaking Spanish at home but using English at school, and for her writing. She worked for “Time” magazine as a journalist then bureau chief from 1983-1990, after which she left the magazine to work full-time as a writer. Her novels include *Dreaming in Cuban*, a finalist for the National Book Award; *The Aguero Sisters*; and *Monkey Hunting*. She has written three non-fiction books on various topics concerning Cuba, one collection of poetry, and two children’s books. Her books have been translated into a dozen languages. Ms. Garcia has been a Guggenheim Fellow, a Hodder fellow at Princeton University, and the recipient of a Whiting Writers’ Award.

George Saunders is the author of the short story collections “Pastoralia,” “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline” (both New York Times Notable Books) and, most recently, “In Persuasion Nation.” “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline” was a Finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award. “In Persuasion Nation” is one of three finalists for the 2006 STORY Award for best short story collection of the year. Saunders is also the author of the novella-length illustrated fable, “The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil” the New York Times bestselling children’s book, *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip*, illustrated by Lane Smith, (which has won major children’s literature prizes in Italy and the Netherlands), and a forthcoming book of selected non-fiction, *Snow in Dubai*. In 2002, Saunders was selected by The New Yorker in 2002 as one of the best writers 40 and under. In 2006, he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship and named a MacArthur Fellow. He teaches in the Creative Writing Program at Syracuse University.

Gerda Weissmann Klein is a Holocaust survivor, and author of the highly acclaimed memoir, *All But My Life*, about her harrowing experiences during one of the darkest eras in our world's history. A noted speaker on the experience of her survival, and keeper of the memories of those who died, Gerda Weissmann Klein is a remarkable witness and writer about Jewish consciousness and history. She is the winner of an Academy Award for "Best Documentary" for the film version of her memoir. As well, more generally, Mrs. Klein speaks out on issues of relevance to human rights everywhere, and in that cause now works through her own foundation to bring topics that teach justice and tolerance to classrooms in the United States and around the world.

Ana Castillo is one of the leading voices of the Chicana experience, and is a highly acclaimed writer strongly influenced by and effective at teaching from her Mexican heritage. She is the author of 14 books, and her fiction, non-fiction and poetry has been widely anthologized around the world. Her prize-winning novels include *The Mixquihuala Letters*, *So Far From God*, and *Peel My Love Like An Onion*. Her new novel is *The Guardians*, published by Random House in July, 2007—a book that renders the perilous lives and human experiences on all sides of the immigration and border issues so topical and relevant to contemporary American experience. Currently, she is the Martin Luther King, Jr., Outstanding Minority Scholar at M.I.T., in Cambridge, Mass. Ana Castillo makes her home in New Mexico.

Dan Chaon is the author of the prize-winning debut collection of stories, *Among the Missing*, a finalist for the National Book Award (2002); and the novel, *You Remind Me Of Me* (2004). The short story collection, *Fitting Ends* has been selected for the "Just Voices" program, for its combination of complexity and accessibility of literary style, as well as for its subtle focus on issues of high relevance to teaching justice and tolerance within the structure of the family. Dan Chaon currently directs the Creative Writing program at Oberlin College, in Ohio.

We are thrilled that noted local author Lee Barnes will participate in the spring of 2009:

Lee Barnes lives in Las Vegas, Nevada where he teaches English and creative writing at the College of Southern Nevada. He graduated the University of Nevada Las Vegas as the Outstanding Senior in the College of Arts and Letters, earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in English, and later graduated Arizona State University with a Master of Fine Arts in Creative writing (fiction). Prior to entering the field of higher education, he worked a deputy sheriff, a narcotics agent, a private investigator, a construction laborer and a casino employee. He served in Vietnam as a member of Special Forces. His fiction focuses largely on working-class characters of the west and southwest, many of whom are war veterans. The work may be best described as Post-modern Naturalism as his narratives often deal with external events that subsume his characters as they try to deal with their sense of disaffection and negotiate a path through contemporary life. He has published some forty short stories and essays and four books. "The Run," one of his stories has been adapted to short film and was released in 2006, and another, "The Mind Is its own Place," is under contract with an independent film company. He has a fifth book (short story collection) under contract with the University of Nevada Press. Currently he is polishing the final draft of novel set in home front during the last year of WWII, and is writing a nonfiction account of the 2003 shootout at Harrah's Casino in Laughlin between the Hells Angels and Mongols motorcycle clubs. His short fiction has been awarded the Willamette Fiction Award and the Arizona Authors Association

Fiction Award. *Gunning for Ho*, his first book, was a finalist for The Texas Institute of Letters First Fiction Award, and his Las Vegas novel, *The Lucky*, was a finalist for the Western Writers of America Fiction Award.

III. Eligibility

Just Voices is open to High School students who comprise the multitude of diverse learners that make up today's classrooms, including "typical" learners, English language learners, those with learning disabilities, gifted students, and "at-risk" students. **The objective of *Just Voices* is to enhance literacy through awakening students to the broader world and engaging them with writers from around the world, providing them with the opportunity to explore issues of difference and freedom, while celebrating their own uniqueness and that of their classmates in the process.**

IV. Impact

Because inclusive practices are fundamental to the philosophy of the program, students of widely varying learning styles will be reached. Many of these students will be children "on the cusp" – those at risk of dropping out of school for a variety of reasons. Striving to reduce the dropout rate in the CCSD, we have created this completely new and dynamic program in the hope that it will give these students the motivation they need to stay in school and graduate. Moreover, **we believe that it will inspire all students to fulfill their potential.**

V. Measurable Goals and Evaluation Criteria

The *Nevada PIE* Research Committee's charge is to evaluate students' academic and social performance in order to determine the impact of *Nevada PIE* initiatives on students' school performance, and to create a data-driven strategy for the effective use of Nevada's public resources. The committee currently coordinates doctorate level research projects that address the treatment effects of inclusive practices within the CCSD. In addition, CCSD has initiated a comprehensive three-year research project that will identify best practices in inclusive education -- so that they may be expanded.

We will evaluate the academic achievement of students involved in *Just Voices* versus their peers in comparable non-*Just Voices* classrooms. Pre- and Post-baseline data will determine whether an increase in student achievement has occurred, and the magnitude of the increase. In addition, we will conduct an annual survey identifying teacher perceptions related to the impact *Just Voices* has had on student learning and performance as well as on their own teaching practices.

Just Voices Founding Beliefs

Literacy is the foundation of a thriving literary environment, an essential component of democracy.

Progress takes place when daring or divergent ideas can be debated and advanced.

Through reading and writing, we exercise judgment, strengthen our ability to analyze complex ideas and form cohesive arguments, and promote tolerance for differing views.

Literature is an expression of the individual spirit; it changes the world.

Inclusive Schools: Helping All Students Succeed

Inclusive schools are predicated on the knowledge that life in the 21st century is becoming increasingly globalized. Schools are being asked to make a difference with students that have traditionally been left behind or set aside; they must now transform themselves into spaces where all students can and do succeed. If we do not attend to this great need now, a generation of students will come of age without the technical, social and intellectual skills they need to work across differences, find common ground, and compete effectively in world markets. *The need for inclusive schools is far beyond giving children a fair shake in a world that we know; it is critical in preparing them to face tomorrows that we can only imagine.*

Just Voices Steering Committee

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Marilyn McKinney & Douglas Unger

Curriculum & School Implementation Committee Co-Chairs

Christa Fialkiewicz & Jose Loya

Professional Development Committee Co-Chairs

Rosemary Holmes-Gull & Saralyn Lasley

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Nevada PIE Mission

Nevada PIE exists to strengthen public school education that is respectful of and responsive to the many cultures, languages and diverse learning styles of Nevada's children and youth.

We provide expanded opportunities for all students to access knowledge and achieve high standards according to their ability so that all students can realize the great promise of America.

Nevada Partnership for Inclusive Education (Nevada PIE)
Judy Machabee, Executive Director, 2383 Winter Cliffs St., Henderson, NV 89052 jmachabee@embarqmail.com 702-279-8881