

Spotlight on IEW's Schools Division

Transcript of Episode 387

Julie Walker: Hello, and welcome to the *Arts of Language* podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, “IEW.” My name is Julie Walker, and I’m honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

Julie Walker: Things have been pretty busy around here, Andrew?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I don't know. I haven't been here much. I've been pretty busy, hitting a different city every weekend for about three months with only a few weeks off, so I am ready to stop traveling.

Julie Walker: Well, and just as you're ready to stop traveling, we are entering into one of our busiest months here at IEW. And one of the things that is so remarkable to me: it's one of our leading areas of growth is our Schools Division.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes, absolutely. It's very exciting.

Julie Walker: And it shouldn't be a surprise to me because that's where this whole Structure and Style approach happened, was in full-time schools.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, that really has nothing to do with it. The reason is that schools are reaching a point where they must differentiate or cease to exist. They have to be good schools striving to be better schools, or nobody will want their kids to be there. And this is happening in the public sector, the charter sector, the private sector, Catholic schools.

It's just universal. And I meet a lot of people who are in the world of schools, realizing that you can't just hang out your shingle and be a school and expect people to be happy. If they're going to take the time and effort to get their kids there or to pay tuition or to be a part of the community, they want it to be a quality thing. And, of course, we are very happy, I think, to help schools up their game very significantly.

Julie Walker: Right. And it was fifteen years ago when I first started working with you. Shortly after I first started working, you said, “Julie, we need a Schools Division because I have all these schools contacting me and I just need someone else so they can help them. And so a few years ago, five or so, we hired Sharyn Staggers, who's now our Schools Division Director.

So welcome to our podcast, Sharyn.

Sharyn Staggers: Thank you. Happy to be here.

Andrew Pudewa: And, I might add, she's one of the most joke literate people that I know.

Julie Walker: It's true. You go down the hall, and you've got a joke—

Andrew Pudewa: I try a joke, and she knows the answer. It's remarkable

Julie Walker: Or at least she gets the answer very quickly, which, of course, is a sign of intelligence. I'm going to jump right in and give everyone your background, Sharyn, but that's not fair. I need to let you give your background and how you came to discover IEW in the school that you were teaching at.

Andrew Pudewa: And how you learn so many jokes.

Sharyn Stagers: The jokes I learned from my father. I grew up having to learn puns, so I feel like that was my training for understanding Andrew Pudewa's humor. I was a classroom teacher for twenty years. I taught math and science.

Julie Walker: Which uniquely qualifies you to teach English composition.

Sharyn Stagers: Right? Completely prepared me. I did always struggle with giving my students writing assignments, knowing how to grade them. I could check them for content and all the information that I asked for, but then when I got to the grading of the actual paper, I wasn't the English teacher, so I didn't know how much do I count off for spelling or grammar or things like that.

So, I always felt like I was giving the students a better grade than what they actually deserved. And I worked for a school that was doing some mandatory teacher training, and it had to do with writing, and I thought, I'll just sit in the back and grade papers. And probably about the first ten minutes into it I thought, no, this is really interesting.

And it was IEW, the *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*, the writing methods course, and really was excited to see what it was going to do for our school. And our administrator wanted those of us not teaching English to incorporate writing and IEW into our subject matter. And so I worked with the English teacher, Mrs. Andrea Pewthers, who was a teacher of the year for IEW but also now works on my team as an Educational Consultant. And she and I put our heads together, and she gave me a checklist and said, "Well, this is what the eighth graders are learning right now." So I took that checklist along with what I wanted for content and merged it together and created a checklist.

And of course, my students said, "Oh, you've been talking to Mrs. Pewthers."

Then they turned in assignments that were beautiful. This whole time they knew how to write. I just wasn't holding them to that standard. So they were getting away. They were being lazy and getting away with substandard because they figured I didn't know any better.

Well, then all of a sudden they started producing really great papers when I started implementing the IEW checklist. Now as a science teacher, I also had to tell them, though, that the IEW stylistic techniques were not necessary for lab reports. And so, you know, I had students wanting

to write about how they anxiously stirred the viscous liquid, and so I kind of had to back them off.

But that was still, that was a fun experience, but that's how I got into IEW that led me here.

Andrew Pudewa: Was I teaching that one, or was it a video?

Sharyn Staggers: This was, you were there as was Julie and Janet Spitler were also there as well, and it was a great experience.

Andrew Pudewa: And I bet at that time you never imagined the future.

Sharyn Staggers: No, I never imagined that I would be here at this point in time, but it's an exciting job. I absolutely love it. Our division is extremely busy, and every day we seem to have new schools that are calling and wanting information and wanting to figure out how to implement IEW in their school.

Andrew Pudewa: One little point I think is interesting is way back in the beginning when we were getting in the homeschool world, people who were excited and willing to represent us at conventions. I think at least half or more of them were people with a math, science background. A number of them were nurses who said, "I never could figure out the whole writing thing until I saw the system, the Structure and Style."

And so it does appeal to kind of that orderly process, inputs output, controllable world rather than the super fuzzy world of express yourself and does it sound good?

Julie Walker: Right with a math problem, you know if it's right or wrong. With a writing prompt, or you know, if you don't have a clear pathway, a clear checklist, you don't know if it's right or wrong. And so, Sharyn, for you to bring in that checklist to your science students, it probably gave your science students, all right, maybe they complained a little bit, but now they knew what you expected.

Sharyn Staggers: Exactly. It certainly did make a difference.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, what's the big news in School Division?

Sharyn Staggers: Well, the big news in Schools Division is we are actually adding new Educational Consultants to our team this summer because we are growing so much. And I think one of the things that when schools contact us, one of the things they're most interested in is our *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*, our teacher training, because many teachers never had a class that taught them how to teach writing. And so we did have a virtual workshop earlier this summer with around 150 participants. We had teachers participating in The Great TWSS Adventure as well. We also get them set up with an IEW account, where they can have access to the on-demand streaming videos. And so we have all these different ways that we get them trained and help them implement the curriculum.

Julie Walker: So Sharyn, just take us through the steps. So I am a school teacher, or maybe I'll take a step further. I'm a school administrator, and I am interested in making our school great. And I know that the writing is a little, needs some bolstering. What do I do? Take me through the steps.

Sharyn Staggars: Absolutely. Well, the first place that we would start is every school is assigned an Educational Consultant. So whenever they have a question, they have a dedicated person that is working with their school that will learn all the ins and outs and understand that particular situation. So we get them assigned to an Educational Consultant, and then we talk about training and how would they like their teachers to be trained. And we do have several options for that. And then once we decide on the training, we talk about curriculum, and we do have choices as far as *Structure and Style for Students*, our video-based lessons. Some schools prefer our theme-based books, and so those are both an option.

Sometimes schools will mix it up a little bit and have some of each, depending on teacher preference even. And then once we have them set up with their training and they've purchased the curriculum, we are also available to answer questions. We do Zoom calls with teachers to help them understand how to move through the material, and we're just available for that support for our schools.

Andrew Pudewa: Do you know if we have any schools that have a significant number of English as a second language or foreign language students who are using our approach in teaching writing to English second language people?

Sharyn Staggars: We do. We have several schools that are within the Chicago Public School district, and quite a few of those elementary schools have students that have a different language, and they find that our curriculum is very beneficial with their reading comprehension and learning vocabulary.

So we have some real positive results.

Andrew Pudewa: And that's been a long relationship. I remember at least ten years ago, maybe twelve, filling out a like a twenty-page application to become a vendor for Chicago Public Schools.

Sharyn Staggars: Right, and we still fill those out.

Andrew Pudewa: Thinking this is not going to be worth the effort. They're never going to do anything. And yet, year after year after year, they seem to like it, and it seems to be working well.

Sharyn Staggars: It is. We also have quite a few schools that focus on special education, and they find IEW to be very positive in those situations as well.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, do many, now, I know when I was talking to schools more, they always wanted research based or research proven. They wanted to know that we had creds in academic

terms, so we worked a lot on trying to get some studies and line up some research. Is that still a frequent thing you have to deal with?

A school says, “Okay, we like the idea, but prove it.”

Sharyn Stagers: We do have some schools that would like to see that. And we do have studies in the past that show how effective we are, and we have some things in the works as far as doing some more current studies. A lot of times they'll also want to see if we're, how we align with state standards, and we have information on that as well.

But you know, a lot of our schools are word of mouth as well, where they have heard or seen progress from other schools, and they want to find out more about it. And so sometimes their research-based evidence comes from other schools, and they actually will go visit and observe and find out for themselves firsthand what it looks like.

Andrew Pudewa: Excellent.

Julie Walker: So Sharyn, what would you say are the top challenges that upper elementary teachers face when it comes to writing assignments?

Sharyn Stagers: Well, they find that the students really don't know how to write, and sometimes they're at a loss at where to even start with them. And that's another big appeal of our program because every year we do start in Unit 1. They cycle through the program, and they build on what they've learned before, and the teachers really have that starting point where they know where to begin and how to help their students.

Julie Walker: That's great.

Andrew Pudewa: I remember one time I was doing professional development somewhere for some group, some school or district, and we were going through the nine units, and of course most of our listeners would know that Unit 1 and 2 is just key word outlines, note taking, and rewriting from notes from a source text sentence by sentence. It's very dictated content.

Then Unit 3: Retelling Narrative Stories. Unit 4: Summarizing References. Unit 5: Writing from Pictures. Six—Research. Seven—Inventive Writing. Well, this teacher said to me, “So you don't do any real writing until Unit 7?” And I was a little taken aback at the moment because in my mind it's all real writing.

Do you get that very much from people who are so kind of in this idea that maybe it's too easy or we're helping too much or we're giving too much away, and we're not really making them figure out everything until later in the syllabus. I mean, if it's nine units, Unit 7 falls usually spring, March or so.

Sharyn Stagers: Well, I think so many times teachers, they think that writing is giving a student a blank page and a student being able to just write. And so when they find out that we

don't give them a blank page till Unit 7, that puzzles them because they don't know what in the world would you even do before that.

And so some of it is just a little bit of education on showing them what we do in those prior units and how it finally leads up to Unit 7 and a blank page, and how much more successful the students are when they get to that point.

Andrew Pudewa: And it's probably also amplified by the fact that a lot of standards, district standards, state standards use prompts to evaluate student writing skills. At least they did that a lot more, maybe twenty years ago, than now. But that idea of, okay, if the kids have to respond to a prompt, they get no external information, no help.

It's just their brain and whatever they carry around in it. So what we should do is in the beginning of the year, start throwing prompts at them every week, and then by the spring when we test, they'll be good at it. Only that doesn't work.

Sharyn Staggers: Well, it doesn't work because the teachers will take those papers and then not know how to help them. They'll say, "Well, this isn't great." So what do they do? Give them another one? Yeah. You know, it's hard to know what to tell them to do, so we take that guesswork out of the equation.

Andrew Pudewa: So, let's shift over and think about some schools you have worked with for many years—five, five or more years. What would you say are the traits that make that school so successful? What do they have or do that makes them want to continue year after year, other than getting good results, but what are some of the dynamics in the school that make that work?

Sharyn Staggers: Well, they definitely do see the improvement, and that motivates them. But these schools are also making sure that the teachers are trained. If they have new staff come on, they immediately get them trained with IEW, and a lot of them are involved in our Premium Membership, and they attend some of the Master's Classes, and they continue learning more about IEW and our methods.

Julie Walker: And they listen to our podcast.

Sharyn Staggers: They do listen to the podcast and,

Andrew Pudewa: We hope so.

Sharyn Staggers: But I also think just some of the more successful schools have a mentoring program where they have teachers that are familiar with IEW helping the new staff and making sure that they do have the knowledge and the help and getting them connected with their Educational Consultants.

Julie Walker: So, I taught first and second grade many years ago. One thing that I think was really helpful in the school that I taught at is we were kind of all doing the same thing. The

school had a curriculum that we were using across the board. I imagine that that's something that is also helpful for teachers.

Like in your case, you learned the Structure and Style method, but it was reinforced by the English teacher. Everyone on campus was using the same method.

Sharyn Staggers: That's right. So everyone understood.

Andrew Pudewa: Talking to each other, which I think is kind of sad because in middle school you start to see the separation of subjects more. Like it's more common in upper elementary to have one teacher who pretty much teaches all the subjects with maybe the exception of math, PE, art, but that teacher can integrate writing into science or social studies or health or whatever.

But middle school you tend to have English people, science people, social studies people, other people, and they don't necessarily talk to each other. So it's kind of the opposite of what we think would be good, which would be integration. So it's almost like disintegration. And I know that's one thing that a few people I know in who work in that middle school world are just, like you, so happy to have something that you can all learn and you can all use parts of it in whatever you're teaching.

Julie Walker: Let me give you another illustration. So I'm not the administrator anymore because my entire school is now on board, but now I've left that school, and they're doing great, and I'm going to start at another school, and I'm going to teach fifth grade. And no one in the school is interested in implementing the Structure and Style approach.

What can little ol' me do in my situation?

Sharyn Staggers: You can still teach Structure and Style even if it's only in fifth grade because that one year of instruction for those students will still make a difference. They're still going to learn tools that will be beneficial later on, so it's still worth it.

Julie Walker: And you've got teacher training just for me. You don't have to do the whole school all at once?

Sharyn Staggers: That's right. We've got it for individuals, groups, large schools, multiple schools. Any amount. We have a way to train you.

Andrew Pudewa: I had this experience. It was, I think, in a Washington State school district when I lived in Idaho, and I was working with the school with, well, it was a general seminar actually, so I had a mix of people. Right. So private school teachers, some homeschoolers, some public school teachers, and this woman came back.

She said, "Well, I did your seminar last time you were here, and I've been teaching it in seventh grade, and it's really working well." So I naturally thought, well, can we help you spread this through your school? And she said, "No, it's my secret weapon."

Julie Walker: Oh, wow.

Andrew Pudewa: And I, part of me was, well, I guess that's cool because she's getting success and happy, but if it was so good, why wouldn't you want to share it?

I think that's kind of an anomaly. But often I think we do find a teacher who finds us somehow, doesn't have administration buy-in or support, but goes ahead and learns our system, starts teaching it, and then other teachers start to notice that fifth grade teacher who tries it out. Well, those kids are going to go to sixth grade, and they're going to kind of be like a lot better than the students that sixth grade teacher used to get in terms of knowing what to do when they face the paper and the writing activity.

Sharyn Staggers: And I have seen that happen quite often where we have schools where the fourth grade teacher did IEW one year, and then I get a phone call, and the fifth grade teacher now wants to do it, and a few years down the line, the whole school, and it doesn't always happen, but we see it quite often where schools may not buy into the entire school using IEW, but they do it a grade at a time.

Andrew Pudewa: Another thing I've heard is teachers say, "This just makes grading so much easier." I think when you asked what are some of the hardest things, I think for your average teacher in your average situations, how do you grade objectively without accidentally favoring natural talent or penalizing a lack thereof or not grading, which might be a good option, but is generally not an option.

Do you find our checklists really relieve a lot of grading stress for teachers?

Sharyn Staggers: When teachers find out we have that tool and understand exactly what it is, they do get very excited because it does make grading quite a bit easier for them. So it's a big benefit to have those checklists available.

Julie Walker: So I know you've been growing because you're adding more staff to your team. Right? What would you say to a school that wants to get started? I mean, we talked about the training and all that, but what's the first step? Should I come by and visit you here in the great state of Oklahoma?

Andrew Pudewa: Absolutely. Everyone should come by.

Julie Walker: Everyone should come visit us.

Sharyn Staggers: They can just pick up the phone and even just dial the 1-800 number and our

Julie Walker: 1.800.856.5815

Sharyn Staggers: And you don't even have to know an extension. The receptionist will ask a few questions, and then you will get put in touch, connected with your Educational Consultant, and then we'll just go from there.

Julie Walker: And I know that you have examination packets so

Sharyn Staggers: We do

Julie Walker: that teachers can request an examination packet that has information in there, including our magalog, our magazine and catalog specifically for full-time schools. What about a parent who has their child enrolled in a school, and they would like to see IEW involved?

Sharyn Staggers: Well, the parent can also call, and the receptionist will put them in touch with an Educational Consultant, but we will give the examination packet to the parent to take to the school, to their contact person, and if there is interest, then the school can get in touch with us.

Julie Walker: So super easy to do to get going with IEW. And I think, of course, I mentioned this earlier, I did teach school, and as Sharyn mentioned, I was never taught how to teach writing. There was math methods, there was reading methods, but never any writing methods. And so when I stumbled upon the Institute for Excellence in Writing and the *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*, I was like, oh, not only did this help me now teach my own boys because I was homeschooling at the time, it helped me become a better writer so that when I went back to school and got my master's degree, I was able to graduate with high honors because I knew how to write and actually was able to teach some of the students that were my peers in my class, how to write. So, it's just a wonderful experience that it's come full circle. So, Sharyn, any final words that you'd like to do to encourage parents and teachers to explore more about what we're doing here at IEW?

Sharyn Staggers: Well, they can definitely go to IEWSchools.com. And we have a getting started page, and they can find information about requesting that examination packet or just picking up the phone or emailing Schools@IEW.com. There's quite a few ways that they can get in touch with us.

Andrew Pudewa: And probably, the worst thing would be to just not do that because you know the old definition of insanity: if you just keep doing what you've been doing and expect different results.

Whereas if you really want to, I think it, I, I'm going to quote a teacher that talked to me, and this was many years ago. She was teaching fifth grade in a school in Spokane, and she said to me, "You know, I've been doing this for several years now, and I didn't really see the bigger picture of the value. It was nice. All the kids were willing to write, and the product was better, and I liked the system. It made my life easier. But I had one student who said to me at the end of the year, she said, 'Mrs. Idy, I have learned more in your class this year than I ever learned in anyone else's class ever because you taught me how to think better.'"

Of course, I said, "Well, you're probably a good teacher, and you did all sorts of other good things too.

And she said, "Yes, no, it's the writing program. It does more than just teach writing. It really does teach students how to think better." And I think that was a moment right around when I said

to you, “Julie, we gotta, we gotta do more to serve schools.” Of course now here we are with a room full of people working hard to help teachers in schools, help students not just do better academically but to really develop that cognitive system of dealing with information in the best possible ways.

Julie Walker: Yes. Teaching students how to write and how to think. Isn't that what we want?

Sharyn Staggers: It is.

Julie Walker: Thank you, Sharyn. Thank you, Andrew.

Julie Walker: Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, Google Podcasts, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you can also find show notes and relevant links from today's broadcast. One last thing: would you mind going to iTunes to rate and review our podcast? This really helps other smart, caring listeners like you find us. Thanks so much.