

Collins Writing Program Implementation Profile

East Hartford Middle School East Hartford, CT

In 2010, ConnCan, a statewide education advocacy organization dedicated to closing Connecticut's Achievement Gap, named East Hartford Middle School one of the state's top ten middle schools for overall student improvement. Principal Nathan Quesnel attributes the school's recent success to his faculty's commitment to integrating writing into their daily instruction and to creating frequent opportunities for their students to practice writing persuasively in every content area. This school-wide initiative, called *Writing to Learn*, continues to be inspired and supported by the Collins Writing Program.

Background

A large urban middle school with over 70% minority students from low income backgrounds, East Hartford Middle School has struggled over the years not only with chronic low scores in student performance but also a negative school climate. Before 2008, the school's leadership changed hands five times in four years, and by 2008, student discipline concerns were at an all time high. While in recent years stronger leadership and higher expectations have resulted in the suspension rate being cut by 40%, the state has categorized the school as "needing improvement" in student performance for the last seven years.

In 2009, when Principal Nathan Quesnel took over as the school's principal, the Collins Writing Program had already been introduced, but only a small number of teachers were implementing it with any consistency. "There was a disjointed sense of what the expectations were," said the principal. Beginning in 2009, Quesnel attempted to revamp the program by requiring its implementation across the disciplines and creating a team-oriented approach to its development in each of the school's departments.

Implementation

From 2009-2010, with the support of the principal and department heads, John Collins focused on building an understanding of the program among the faculty. To that end, he conducted workshops to familiarize the teachers with the program's various writing assignments, modeled instruction of these assignments, and observed teachers in their classrooms as they taught these assignments themselves. In particular during this first year, the teachers at EHMS were encouraged and held accountable for incorporating Type One and Type Two writing assignments into their daily instruction, which Quesnel notes were particularly useful strategies for monitoring the students' knowledge of content.

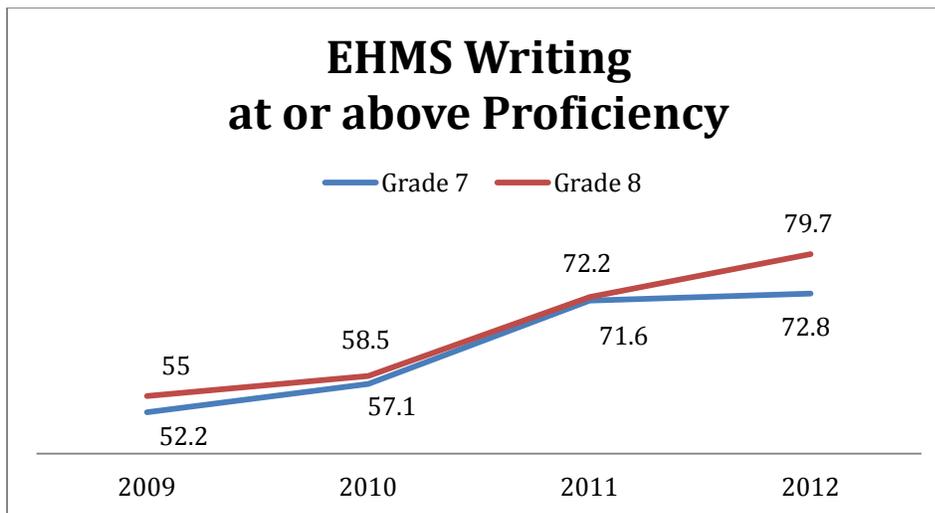
In 2010, Quesnel and Collins resolved to raise the level of expectations for student writing. This decision was motivated in part by the still-low scores on the writing portion of the state test—a 45 minute timed persuasive essay—which suggested that instructors needed to emphasize

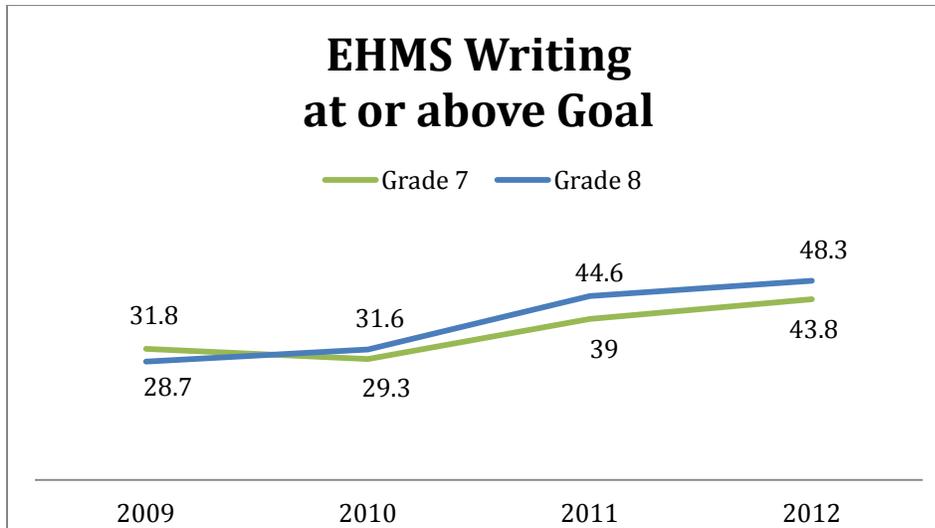
persuasive writing skills. In addition to giving their students Type One and Type Two writing assignments, teachers were now asked to use Type Three (or what Quesnel called “game condition”) persuasive essays to address content related themes and issues.

With guidance from Collins, Quesnel and the EHMS faculty drew up an original template for a persuasive essay that provided the school with a common language for *effective* persuasive writing across the curriculum. “We couldn’t just have the kids write more,” recalls Collins. “We had to ask them to write a particular way . . . [which required a more] targeted intervention.” To this end, the school’s 61 teachers had regular folder reviews (attended by Collins, Quesnel, and the assigned department head) during which they were asked to show examples of their students’ Type Three writing, provide a self-review of their teaching of writing, and express any concerns they had about the Collins Program. Collins notes that the participation of the principal and department heads in these meetings has helped the school become self-sufficient in implementing his program over time while providing the teachers with more targeted, individualized feedback.

Results

Quesnel notes that the “overall improvement” that EHMS has made in the last few years, and for which it was recently recognized by ConnCan, is in large part due to the growth that the students have made as writers during that time. Out of writing, reading, and math, he says, “The one score that is really jumping is writing.” Below are two graphs that show the percentage of students at or above proficiency in writing at EHMS from 2009 to the present.





A key feature of the Collins Program is the integration of writing across the curriculum and Quesnel credits the program with providing the structure and common language his school needed to make writing an integral part of every teacher's daily instruction. Perhaps what EHMS's story illustrates above all else, however, is that the Collins Writing Program will prove only as effective as the school's faculty is willing to make it. At EHMS, no doubt remains where writing stands on the faculty's list of priorities, as is perhaps made most clear by this quote by Douglas Reeves, which stands at the top of every memo regarding the school's *Writing to Learn* initiative:

"There are no silver bullets in education. But writing—particularly nonfiction writing—is about as close as you can get to a single strategy that has significant and positive effects in nearly every other area of the curriculum."

Thanks to the commitment that the teachers of EHMS have made to the teaching of writing and to the implementation of the Collins Program, EHMS is now renowned in the district for its culture of writing and its dedication to student achievement.