

Collins Writing Program Implementation Profile

Marshfield, Massachusetts

“Not everything that counts can be counted. . . . Not everything that is counted counts,” wrote Einstein long ago. He wasn’t writing about this era of the Big Count in state testing, but his quote is apropos. Marshfield has been able to do more than rise above its demographics to achieve high state test scores. The staff also believes in focusing on the individual as a student and as a unique human being. One of the ways the staff has succeeded in both areas—those that are counted and those areas that count but are not measured - is the Collins Writing Program.

History behind the Plan

The Collins Writing Program has been used successfully in the high school English department for nearly two decades. The department has long been regarded as the crown jewel in a school system with many gems. However, the use of the program in the rest of the system has been spotty. Large group workshops were conducted in the district long ago, and in the last decade, teachers were sent to workshops outside the district individually and in small groups. This random approach produced a number of benefits, including some great writing instruction; however it was not always followed up to deepen and strengthen practice. This scattered approach was consistent with the rest of the academic program, where each of the five elementary schools was thought of as a separate fiefdom, and, in terms of continuity, teachers next door to one another might, sometimes, just as well be teaching in different counties.

In the late 1990s, individual teachers, as well as a new crop of administrators, realized that to produce strong results on the rigorous MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System), they needed to meet four criteria: a coordinated effort, common and consistent language, writing as thinking, and a strategic focus. With the high school English department as the flag ship, a solid number of Collins trained practitioners in schools throughout the system, and a group of administrators who believed in the program from previous experience, a plan was developed to work toward meeting the four criteria by implementing the Collins Writing Program districtwide. That plan is in its fourth year of implementation.

The Plan

Marshfield administrators do not believe in what the Assistant Superintendent calls “the one shot inoculation.” A great one-day presentation to a large group may have people smiling and saying, “That was entertaining, and I agreed with everything he said.” But the one-day inservice is not a program. It is, at best, a start. Thus a more intensive training was initiated, with the goal of completing implementation in September 2006. A variety of training opportunities were set up so that every teacher would receive five three-hour sessions. These sessions have been offered at different times, so that the busy afternoon and summer schedules of teachers can be taken into account. Veteran teachers who were trained years ago, young teachers, aides, and tutors are taking part in the training. Among the comments from the teachers are:

It’s great when every teacher in the building speaks the “same language” in a curriculum area.

It's an important course to take. The content fits right in with our curriculum. This workshop really helped me think how important it is to use writing in the areas of science and social studies.

This was an excellent workshop. I have been using this program with all of my tests, and it makes writing assignments clearer and easier to grade.

This course is a wonderful refresher for me. The whole district benefits from the John Collins Program.

In addition to the training, a Collins associate offers demonstration lessons in teacher's classrooms, where concerns are met and questions answered. The progress toward full implementation has been gradual and is following a design similar to one for mathematics. A math portfolio begins at grade 1 and follows the student through the years at school. It is periodically reviewed by administrators and coordinators to ensure a coordinated and consistent approach. In writing, the Cumulative Writing Folder is being used and, like the math folders, will be checked periodically.

Staff has also begun using the program in another critical way—on Open Response items. Open responses account for 30% or more of most high stakes tests, and they are often the most challenging items for students. Training has begun on pulling Focus Correction Areas (FCAs) from writing prompts to create a holistic scoring rubric that will allow the student to create clear directions and a more direct way to answer the prompts. Every student will approach every Open Response item in the same way.

Results

Given age and skill, the hardest test Marshfield students take is the fourth-grade Long Composition, on which they are asked to write a five- to eight-paragraph narrative in a morning. Several years ago, scores across the system averaged 13 out of 20 points. In 2003, they averaged 16 out of 20. One teacher, a strong user of the Collins program, had five of her 20 mixed ability group students score the full 20 points. In the third-grade reading test, Marshfield is in a three-way tie for the top scores on Massachusetts' South Shore (a group of about 20 communities, most more affluent than Marshfield). In the fourth-grade English/language arts and mathematics tests, Marshfield ranks eighth in the state and is by far the top scorer on the South Shore. In fifth-grade science, Marshfield is 23rd in the state and second on the South Shore (www.boston.com). In the pilot test of pulling FCAs from Open Response prompts, the average scores are of 3.34 out of 4.

All tests need to be understood in terms of demographics. In Massachusetts, the Gaudet Report rates school systems and their test scores against socio-economic and demographic profiles. It then develops an effectiveness scale. On this scale, Marshfield rates between seventh and twelfth (depending on the test) among the 351 cities and towns in the state on the previously mentioned tests (except the Open Response pilot test).

The middle and high school scores are also on the rise, and with further implementation and consistent practice in attacking the Open Response, staff anticipate even higher results. The slow, steady implementation provides in-depth training for teachers, a cohesive and consistent writing program across all disciplines, high test scores, and, most importantly, a powerful program that will benefit every student, now and in the future.

For more information, contact Collins Education Associates at 1-800-932-4477.