

# Collins Writing Program Implementation Profile

**Merrimack Valley Regional School District, New Hampshire**

“The incoming students are better writers than they used to be!” That was Curt Sokness’s response when asked what feedback he gets from middle and high school teachers after five years of implementing the Collins Writing Program. Sokness, the district’s assistant superintendent, points with pride to the fact that his district’s writing scores, which once were well below average, now surpass state averages – an impressive record for a rural district serving more than 3000 students, virtually all of whom come from what Sokness terms “humble backgrounds.”

## **Developing a Plan**

In 1998 the district’s K-12 Language Arts Committee identified writing as a priority concern. Despite pockets of excellence in writing instruction, the committee felt there was a lack of consistency in approach. Furthermore, they considered that lack of consistency to be a significant factor in the district’s low writing scores. After several committee members attended Collins Writing Program workshops, the committee made a recommendation to introduce the program to the entire MVRSD staff.

The kickoff for the Program took place in two sessions in March 1998—one for elementary and one for secondary teachers. Teachers’ response was extremely positive, as they welcomed the practical strategies for increasing the amount of student writing and making efficient use of their own time. They also welcomed the district’s commitment to the follow up and support outlined at those sessions.

## **Supporting the Implementation**

Starting that spring and continuing today, the district has provided the kind of support for teachers that foster positive change. Understanding that a one-day workshop—no matter how well it is received—doesn’t change a school’s culture, the schools’ instructional leaders put together a building-based support system. In fact, after the initial large-group introduction, all support from Collins Education Associates was provided on a building and small-group basis. Each school used the technical assistance a little differently. “The best staff development is at the school level,” observed Sokness.

The assistance took several forms. For example, Collins Associates went into classrooms and conducted demonstration lessons and then met with the teachers to debrief and answer questions. Teachers also had opportunities to meet with a Collins Associate for specific technical assistance; those sessions took place as individual consultations, grade-level meetings, team meetings, or department meetings, depending on the school and its needs. Each summer a weeklong course was offered that gave teachers an opportunity to work in-depth with the program and plan specific ways the Collins Writing Program could be used in their classrooms.

The support has made a difference. Chris Barry, former principal of Loudon Elementary and now the district assistant superintendent, feels the implementation of the program has shifted teachers’ focus from “creative writing” to “writing instruction.” Barry, who was part of the

original Language Arts Committee, makes another interesting observation. “If you ask teachers what part of our support plan is most beneficial, they’re likely to say the demonstrations and consultations. They really like that. But, from my point of view, the most powerful aspect is the weeklong course. I can see a difference when teachers take the course.”

### **Getting Results**

An important part of the district’s implementation is use of the Collins Cumulative Writing Folder. Each spring since the 1999-2000 school year, Collins Associates have facilitated an end-of-the-year folder review. The folder reviews have taken a variety of forms, based on the needs and goals of each building. Some are done as departmental or team peer reviews; others, as self-reviews; still others, with core teachers conducting peer reviews. With each approach, reviewing student folders provides objective information on the quality of the program implementation. The folder review focuses on nine criteria, which provide information on how frequently students are writing, the clarity and mastery of Focus Correction Areas (FCAs), and the quality of feedback students are getting.

Over the years, the reviews have revealed a marked refinement in the use of the Collins Writing Program. For example, each year the average number of compositions completed by students has increased. So have the average ratings given to the quality and clarity of FCAs, feedback given to students, and (in the elementary grades) the amount of writing across the curriculum. Sokness says teachers have come to look forward to the reviews as a way of confirming their “success and progress with writing.”

Improving student scores on New Hampshire’s statewide writing assessment was a major impetus for adopting the Collins Writing Program. That goal has been accomplished, as MVRSD students now score above state averages. Most notable is the trend among tenth graders, the students who have benefited from the Collins Writing Program the longest. Their scores are now well above state averages. Below is a look at how MVRSD tenth graders have compared to state averages in writing:

#### **Tenth Grade Writing: Average Scores**

<u>Year</u>	<u>MVRSD Average</u>	<u>State Average</u>	<u>MVRSD Difference</u>
2000-01	7.1	6.9	+0.2
2001-02	7.1	6.7	+0.4
2002-03	6.8	5.8	+1.0

The achievements of the district have not gone unnoticed. The New Hampshire Department of Education has cited both the middle and high schools for excellence. In 2002, the Merrimack Valley Regional Middle School was cited as the Middle School of the Year. In 2003, the Merrimack Valley Regional High School was named the Secondary School Representative of Excellence. It was the first time in the ten-year history of the awards that schools from the same district had been named in successive years. Both citations identified the Collins Writing Program as a key component of the schools’ curriculum and instruction.

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