

# Collins Writing Program Implementation Profile

## Stoughton Elementary Schools Stoughton, MA

Over the last five years, Stoughton Elementary Schools has significantly improved its reading and writing skills as measured by the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) scores. Improvement began in 2009 when the district decided to focus on writing across the curriculum with a particular emphasis on text-based writing. In 2011, the schools focused on improving narrative writing by concentrating on strategies to help students learn to write an interesting story with specific details and vivid language.

### **Background**

The Stoughton Elementary School district is located 25 miles south of Boston, Massachusetts. The district includes six elementary schools serving 1,600 students, of which 34% are low income, 15.5% are students with disabilities, and 4% are English language learners.

In 2009, the schools were struggling to improve instruction and student learning, especially in grades three to five. According to MCAS data, only 49% of third graders, 43% of fourth graders, and 66% of fifth graders scored Proficient or above on the English language arts (ELA) portion of the test. Equally important, only 7% of third graders, 2% of fourth graders, and 11% of fifth graders scored Advanced. On the long-composition writing test (usually a narrative task), fourth graders were 4% below the state average for idea development.

Assistant Superintendent Jonathan Ford decided to focus efforts on writing. “At the time, we knew we had terrific teachers in our district. However, we were developing a new language arts curriculum and teachers wanted more guidance on how to strengthen writing and thinking skills. Many students weren’t able to support their ideas with sufficient or specific details, and we wanted to improve in that area. However, we didn’t want to do test prep. We felt the Collins Writing Program would give us flexibility to infuse writing across the curriculum and provide a clear focus.”

### **Training**

In 2008, Collins Associate Bill Atwood began working in the elementary schools. He gave several introductory workshops on all staff release days, but the bulk of the work was at the classroom level. Bill modeled writing lessons in the classrooms and helped teachers provide clear models of what good writing looks like. Staff learned easy ways to help students craft clearer and more developed paragraphs. Hansen Elementary principal Faye

Polillio said, “The lessons weren’t dry or tedious. They were fast moving, fun for students, and easy to follow. Bill gave us strategies we could implement from kindergarten to grade five. And, as a result, student writing started to improve.”

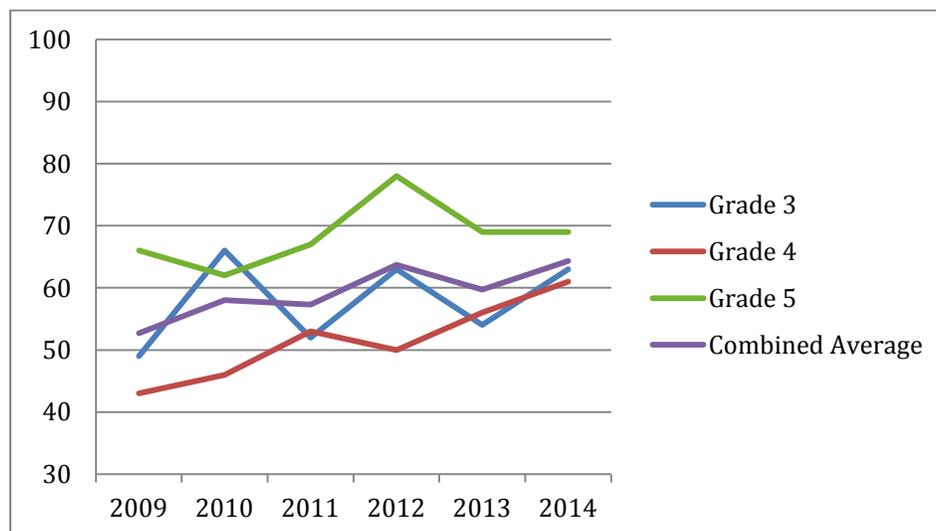
From 2010 to 2014, Bill visited each elementary school several times working with teachers, special educators, and classroom aids. The number of visits depended on the needs of each individual school. In the schools, Bill modeled lessons, coached teachers, reviewed student work, met with grade-level teams, and supplied both print and online materials. Some teachers participated in two-day summer institutes that focused more intensely on developing great writing assignments and strategies to practice writing skills.

## Results in Grades 3, 4, and 5

### Percent Proficient or Advanced

Over the next several years, scores began to rise on the ELA test. The number of students who scored Proficient or above rose from an average of 52.7% in 2009 to 64.3% in 2014, a gain of 22%. In grades three and four, the gain was nearly 30% and over 41%, respectively.

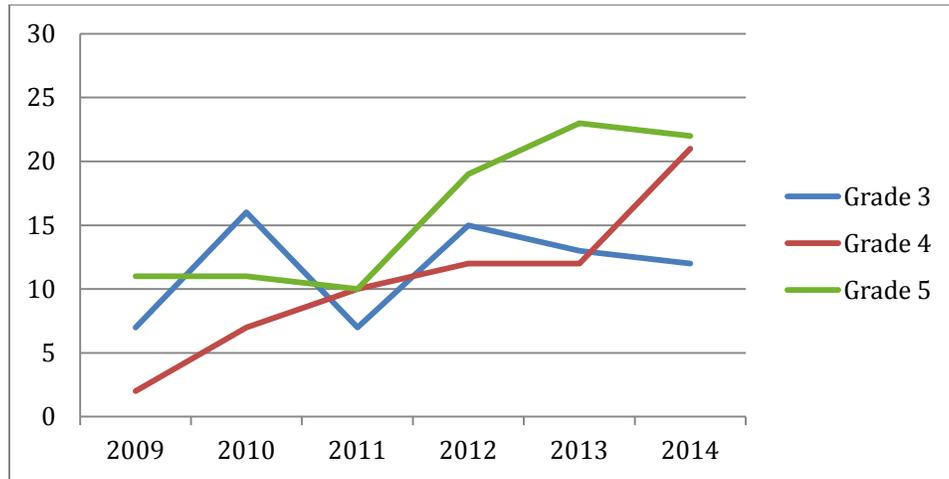
**Stoughton Elementary Schools Proficient or Advanced ELA MCAS Scores 2009–2014**



### Percent Scoring Advanced

While the previous gains were significant, the more dramatic growth was in the number of students who scored Advanced. In 2009, only 2% of fourth graders earned this designation. However, by 2014, the percentage of fourth graders earning Advanced had risen to 21%—a 90% increase. In grades three and five, the percentage of students scoring Advanced nearly doubled.

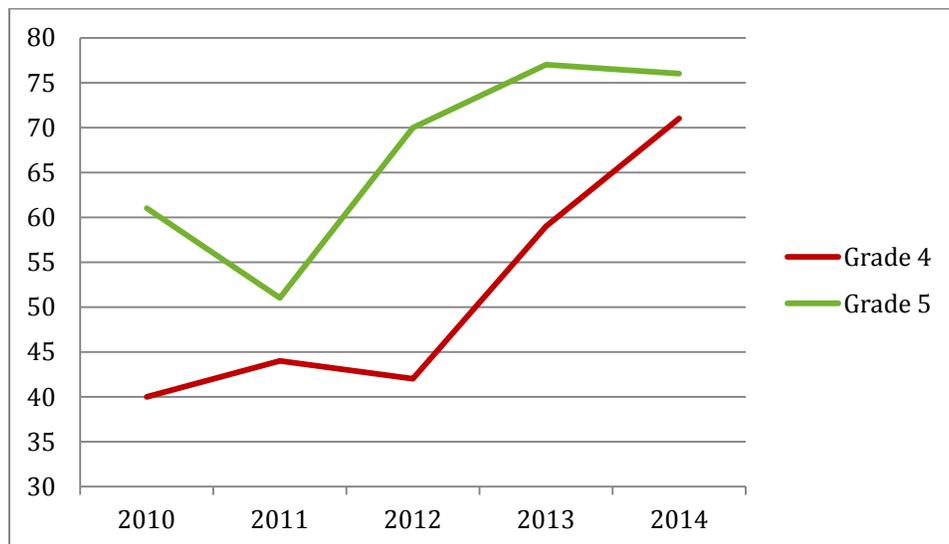
**Stoughton Elementary Schools Advanced ELA MCAS Scores 2009–2014**



**Two Points or Higher on Open Response**

In Massachusetts, text-based writing questions (open response questions) are an important part of the state assessment exam (MCAS). There are usually four to five questions of this type per test, and students are scored on a scale from 0 to 4. In Stoughton, the number of students scoring a 2 or higher rose significantly. In 2010, only 40% of fourth graders scored 2 or higher; by 2014, the number was up to 71%—a gain of almost 78%. In fifth grade, the percentage gain was nearly 25%.

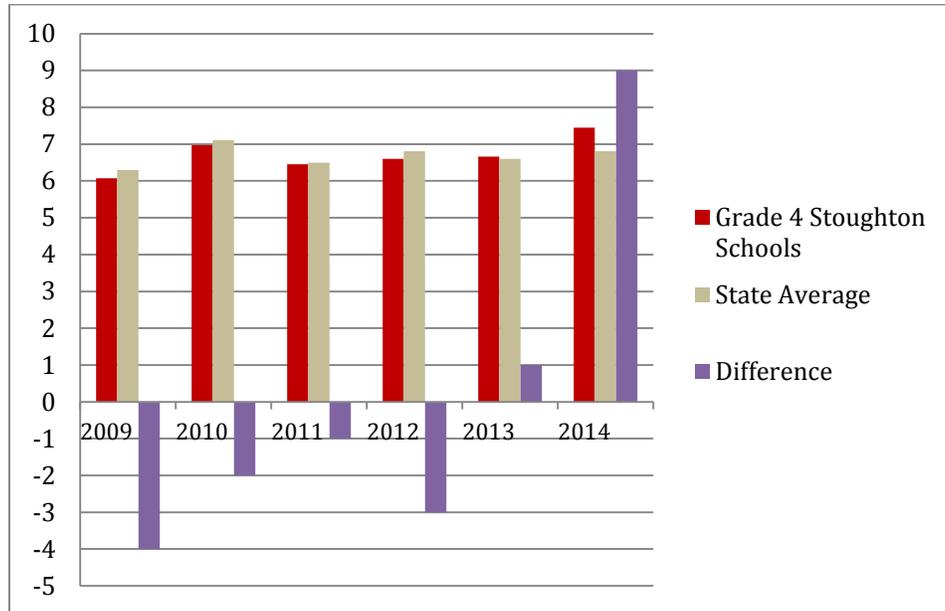
**Stoughton Elementary Schools Open Response MCAS Scores (2 or higher) 2010–2014**



### **Idea Development on Long Composition**

In the area of narrative writing there was also excellent progress. On the Long Composition MCAS, fourth graders are asked to write a multi-paragraph story in response to a prompt. The responses are scored for idea development on a scale of 0–12. Because the scoring system varies from year to year, it's best to compare results to the state average.

**Stoughton Elementary Schools Grade 4 Long Composition (Idea Development) Scores 2009–2014**

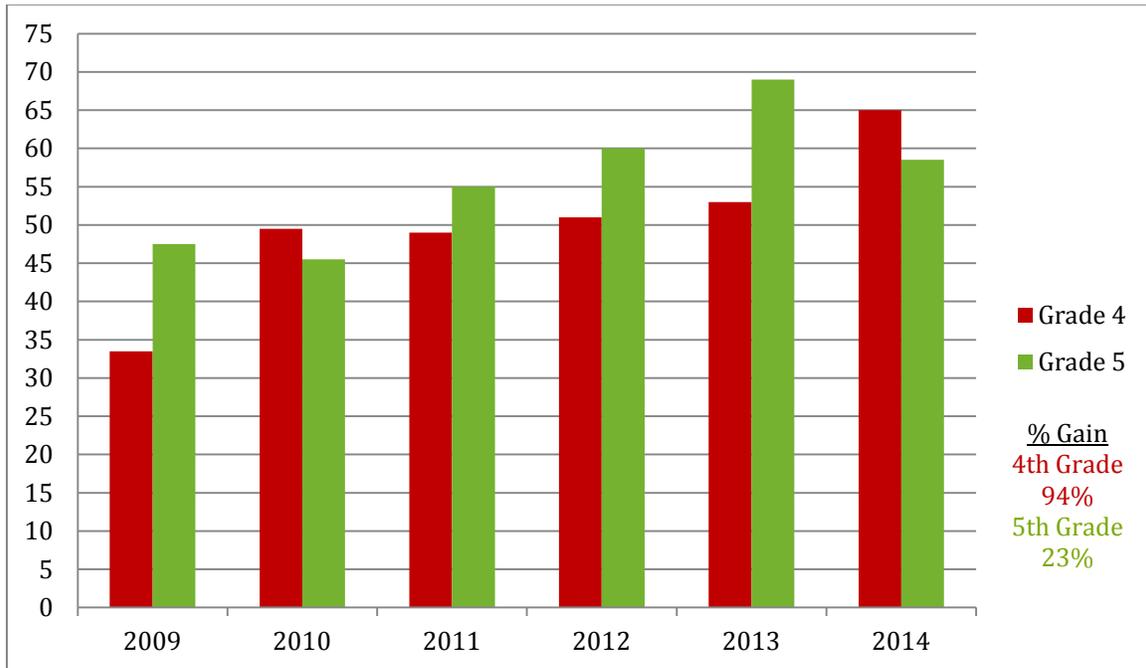


When the tests came back, teachers reviewed the results. Essays were longer, clearer, and more detailed. Students had learned how to craft more compelling stories with attention-getting leads and effective closers. They had worked to include relevant details, quotations, descriptions, and revise for clarity. As a result, scores on the long composition increased—especially compared to the state average. By 2014, Stoughton was equaling or outperforming nearby but more affluent and highly regarded districts like Brookline, Canton, and Milton.

### **Growth Percentiles**

In Massachusetts, progress is also measured by student growth percentiles. This data measures how much a student changes relative to other students statewide with similar scores in previous years. Growth percentiles range from 1 to 99, where higher numbers represent higher growth. This score works independently of performance levels. A score of 70 means that a student scored higher than 70% of academic peers (students with a similar score history). In this area, Stoughton schools made impressive gains. In 2014, grade four rose 48.5% and grade five rose 18.8% over 2009's scores.

## Stoughton Elementary Schools Student Growth Percentiles 2009–2014



### Reactions

As Collins Strategies were introduced, teachers noticed positive results in their classroom writing activities, but when these trends were confirmed by state tests everyone was encouraged. The staff felt that they were going in the right direction. Some of the new strategies were written into Stoughton’s language arts curriculum, with principals very involved in the process. Maureen Mulvey, principal of South School, said, “After Bill visited and worked with staff, I was able to see immediate changes. On my walk-throughs I was able to look for specific strategies he had modeled. Some staff incorporated these strategies into their professional practice goals for their evaluation plans.” Hanson principal Polillio added, “We were able to use the Collins Writing Program to build high expectations starting with our very youngest writers. There was a sense that we were all working together to build a strong foundation in writing. The Collins Writing Program wasn’t the only initiative that helped improve student achievement, but it was an important part of our overall effort. Bill’s joyful work in the classroom helped break down resistance to the feeling that we’re adding yet more strategies from on high.”

### The Bottom Line

In 2009, the Stoughton Elementary School district had a goal: to improve reading, writing, and thinking skills. Specifically, the district wanted students to be able to read and understand a text and then use the text to support their ideas. In addition, it wanted students to be able to write more clearly and add specific details appropriate to the writing task. Toward these ends, the district implemented a professional development program

that included workshops, classroom modeling, coaching, and team meetings to look at student work. The plan was tailored to the needs of each school and was spread out over several years. Results were incremental and showed steady improvement. Principals were very involved in the process by helping and encouraging teachers to make small changes to their practice. All teachers were involved so efforts could be coordinated across grade levels. Stoughton Elementary Schools is continuing to improve by adapting to the rigorous expectations of the Common Core, and it is continuing to work with the Collins Writing Program.

Today, three of the five elementary schools are designated Level 1 schools, the highest performing category in Massachusetts.