

Collins Writing Program Implementation Profile

Whittier Vocational Technical High School - Haverhill, Massachusetts

“Our students have the same expectation to write on a regular basis in vocational shops as they do in their academic classes. Staff members consistently use the Collins Writing Program and they have seen great results.” That was the response from Dennis LaBranche as he recounted the impact of the Collins Writing Program after three years of implementation. As the Coordinator of Community Education, Mr. LaBranche proudly attributes the impressive improvement of students’ MCAS scores (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment Survey) to “the common language for writing used in all areas of instruction.”

Developing a Plan

The administrative team prioritized writing improvement as the major focus of professional development efforts in June, 2002. Superintendent of Schools, Karen Sarkisian, announced to the faculty that the Collins Writing Program would be adopted as the number one building-wide initiative to foster the improvement of student writing. The expectation was clear. All vocational and academic staff would be trained in the Collins Program. Further, all building-wide staff development days would be dedicated totally to training in the Five Types of Writing. Full support would be provided through inservice training, materials (including Cumulative Writing Folders for all departments), twelve days of consulting from a Collins associate, and a five-day summer course. This same level of commitment to the program was repeated in the year 2003.

Students in the graphics department took the initiative to print Type One and Type Three paper for all classes. In fact, batches of the formatted paper are available in the curriculum office for easy access to teachers. As one art teacher reported, “I have seen tremendous growth in my students’ writing from the use of FCAs. They know what things are important when they write about a piece of art. Participating in the summer course has given me confidence in assigning and correcting my students’ writing.” An electronics teacher said, “The five-day summer course has helped me to realize that I don’t have to be an English teacher to get students to write.” Another teacher added, “When every instructor speaks the same language and holds students to a high standard, you can see improvement. It’s great to have a consistent approach.”

Supporting the Implementation

Following the initial all-school inservice training, a Collins associate returned twice monthly to visit shops and classrooms and either review student writing samples with the teachers, or to model a lesson with students, followed by debriefing time with teachers. Instructors responded positively and enthusiastically to this plan. They reported that they felt “less intimidated by the program” when they received immediate and one-on-one feedback. To date, almost 40% of the entire school staff has participated in the summer course over the past three years. The most critical elements of the implementation plan for Whittier have been, without question, the combination of follow-up training, consulting, modeling in shops and academic classes, and folder reviews. The administration made a clear commitment to long-term training for all staff and is convinced that these pieces made the difference. In addition, all new staff members have training sessions. As one administrator stated, “Our priority is to have all teachers confident in the use of the Collins Writing Program.”

Several teachers have commented that the ninth grade students are “coming to us fully trained in the Collins approach. This makes it very easy to start the year off with the Five Types of Writing and very little need for review. It makes our job easier when the students have already had the program in their junior highs. These students are more confident writers than we have ever seen.”

When asked which part of the program plan has had the greatest impact on students’ writing improvement, one administrator said, “The consistency in providing training throughout three full school years has made an enormous difference. Teachers have rallied around this effort and everyone feels good about the results. Assigning writing is not threatening to them.” One teacher explained, “As a newcomer to teaching, this course has saved me a lot of time. I’m not making myself frantic over correcting every little thing on every piece of writing. The FCAs work so well. If I assign a major project in my English class, I break it down to several smaller assignments with FCAs. The students respond much better to this approach.” “We are all in this thing together,” said another teacher. “It makes sense. The strategies we give students through the Five Types of Writing will help them wherever they go.”

Getting Results

The plan was set into action in June, 2002. The goal was to raise the local MCAS scores for tenth grade students from a dismal 24% passing rate. After three years of implementing the Collins Writing Program, the tenth grade scores have spiraled up to an astounding 86% passing rate. The improvement in student writing is not surprising given the whole-hearted effort throughout every level of the school. A less dramatic, incremental improvement occurred in math scores over this same time period. Building-wide FCAs were developed and are posted in every classroom and vocational shop area, alongside the chart of the Collins Five Types of Writing. Every summer for the past three summers students who failed the MCAS have been required to attend a six-week long course to improve their scores. During these sessions, a Collins associate worked alongside the teachers and offered coaching in the regularly assigned writing activities.

Tenth Grade MCAS English/Language Arts Scores	
<u>Year</u>	<u>% Passing</u>
2000	24%
2001	50%
2002	69%
2003	81%
2004	86%

In the Department of Education Newsletter of June 7, 2004, Commissioner of Education David Driscoll recognized Whittier Vocational Technical High School as one of the vocational schools in the state that has shown “significant gains” (in MCAS scores). Whittier Vocational Technical High School is now in its third year of using the Collins Writing Program. The focus is on training of new staff members, reviewing Cumulative Writing Folders with a Collins associate during four days a year, and conducting another summer course. This steady, consistent, and conscious attention to staff development in all disciplines will, undoubtedly, continue to benefit every student.

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