

# Collins Writing Program: Twenty Years of Results

## Introduction

As schools are feeling pressure to become more accountable, the consultants at Collins Education Associates are being asked frequently, "How can we be sure your writing across the curriculum/writing to learn program works?" It's a question we welcome and one that should be asked. With thousands of pages of evaluations on file, we have tried to distill the information into this short summary that defines the program, describes student achievement gains as a result of our program, and provides information regarding evaluation of our workshops.

Since 1982, Collins Education Associates have conducted more than 15,000 workshops and established long-term teacher training and consulting relationships with school districts of every type and size. Tens of thousands of teachers and millions of students in 34 states have benefited from our work. During this time, teachers have identified our approach as the Five Types of Writing or the Cumulative Writing Folder Program. (See [www.collinseducationassociates.com](http://www.collinseducationassociates.com)) During the last five years, it has come to be called the "Collins Writing Program," a title we have adopted.

We define the Collins Writing Program as the set of activities that include the Five Types of Writing with special emphasis on oral reading, focus correcting, and using students' past papers to teach new skills. Student work is organized in the *Cumulative Writing Folder*. The Collins Writing Program is explained in detail in *Developing Writing and Thinking Skills* and the *Cumulative Writing Folder* for grades 4 to 12 and *Developing an Effective Writing Program in the Elementary Grades* and the *Primary Cumulative Writing Folder* for grades 1 to 3. In addition, we have published a variety of books and related products to help implement the program.

## Student Achievement Successes

**School District 1. Boston Public Schools:** Some of our earliest success stories were from the Boston Public Schools. For example, in 1983 only 63 percent of Solomon Lewenberg Middle School 8<sup>th</sup> grade students passed the writing component of the Massachusetts basic skills test, ranking it 24<sup>th</sup> out of 24 Boston middle schools. After implementing the Collins Writing Program the next year, "100 percent of Lewenberg learners passed the minimum competency exam, propelling the Lewenberg School to the number one spot for achievement in writing. Lewenberg out-distanced even the prestigious exam schools, Boston Latin School and Latin Academy." Educators at the school "attribute their success to the Cumulative Writing Folder." (*School Notes*)

The two other schools in the district using the Cumulative Writing Folder "showed impressive gains: the Shaw rose from 73% to 89% of its students passing, and the Irving, from 90% to 99%." (*School Notes*) In fact, consistent improvements in writing in Boston's North Zone made the Cumulative Writing Folder Program a finalist for the Boston Management Consortium's 1993 Follow Through Award.

During the 1986-1987 school year, the Collins Writing Program was implemented in all classrooms in Project Promise in the Timilty Middle School. In January 1987, all students completed a writing sample based on the same prompt. In June, all students completed another writing sample based on a different, but similar, prompt. Two hundred and twenty-one students were involved in this pre-post writing assessment.

Using a scale developed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), ten teachers from another urban school district were trained to evaluate the Project Promise writing samples. The scale provided guidelines that “emphasize such features as content, logic, and development.” The results were then compared to results reported by the NAEP based on writing samples from 2,000 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. As shown in the accompanying table, the January results from the Timilty students in grades 6, 7, and 8 were better than those of the national 8<sup>th</sup> grade sample, and in June, the Timilty students improved even more. In fact, whereas 19 percent of the national 8<sup>th</sup> grade sample wrote adequate or elaborated essays (the top two scores on a four-point scale), 49.7 percent of the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students at the Timilty wrote adequate or elaborated essays.

**Timilty Writing Scores Compared to National Sample**

	Timilty—Grades 6, 7, 8		National Sample—Grade 8
	Jan. 87	Jun. 87	
Not rated	0	0	.06
Unsatisfactory	12.2	4.0	10.3
Minimal	38.9	46.1	70.2
Adequate	41.6	34.8	11.1
Elaborated	7.2	14.9	7.9

A 1990 study of grade 7 Boston middle school students examined the Collins Writing Program and whether or not focus correction areas have an effect on students’ overall writing ability. The result of a pre- and post-exploratory study found that “a very significant change in writing scores assessed by both primary trait and holistic methods prove(s) conclusively that the Cumulative Writing Folder Program works. The students improved their writing skills significantly in all areas.” (O’Neill)

**School District 2. Rockingham County, Virginia:** In 1988, the Commonwealth of Virginia began requiring that all students pass the Virginia Literacy Test before receiving high school credit. This test prompted the teachers and administrators in Rockingham County to implement the Collins Writing Program in 1990. “Since that time Rockingham County has realized significant gains on the percent of students passing the writing assessment. In 1989, during the pilot testing, 78.9% of the students passed. In 1994, 87.2% passed the writing test on first administration at the sixth grade level.” Rockingham County experienced an 8.3% increase in students passing the Virginia Literacy Test over a four-year period due in large part to the Collins Writing Program. (Cubbage)

**School District 3. Lynn, Massachusetts:** In 1999, the lead editorial from the *Daily Evening Item* in Lynn, Massachusetts, reported an average increase of 61% from “a score of 33 two years ago to 53 this year in the third grade Iowa test in the City of Lynn. “Important factors in the improved reading scores are the use of facilitators and the Collins Writing Program.”

**School District 4. Brockton, Massachusetts:** An internal memo in the Brockton, Massachusetts, schools reported, “When the Superintendent’s Challenge for Change Grants were first initiated in 1998, many principals used those funds to introduce the Collins Writing Program to improve teaching strategies in that critical area. This program has since become institutionalized in the Brockton Public Schools, with the result that students’ achievement on the Long Composition has moved from an identified weakness to a strength on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) test over the past two years.” (Malestesta)

**School District 5. Kent Intermediate School District, Michigan:** Kent Intermediate School District in Michigan conducted a study of schools within the district that were “outperforming” expectations on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) Science Test. The identified schools were whose results on the standardized state science test exceeded expectations based upon the school’s demographic makeup. These schools were found to have a number of critical elements in common: “Observations show high achieving schools emphasized writing processes in science lessons which were focused on observation, factual reporting, and recording experimental results, even at the early grades. . . . Type I and II writings, mentioned ten times, were defined by teachers as factual writing, rather than imaginative or creative writing. . . . Focus on factual writing and investigational writing in these schools appears to correlate with higher gains in science.” (Buell)

**School District 6. Milton, Massachusetts:** Milton’s Collicot and Cunningham Schools have been singled out as having outstanding results on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) due in large part to the Collins Writing Program. Of 243 schools “that exceeded their expectations for improvement” on the MCAS which has a heavy emphasis on writing, thirteen of the most exemplary schools were named to be Compass Schools. The Collicot and Cunningham Schools were among this group of thirteen. According to the Panel Review Document for the award, “The Collins Writing Program was the first initiative mentioned in interviews with the superintendent, curriculum coordinators, and principals. . . . In interviews, teachers used a common language to talk about student writing, students indicated that they were required to write in all content classes and parents remarked that they see that their children’s writing is improving.” (Panel Review Report)

**School District 7. Midland, Michigan:** Two years after implementing the Collins Writing Program, the Midland Public School accreditation report documented the improvement in high school writing performance results of H. H. Dow High School’s Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP). Category I represents this top of the scoring scale while Category IV represents the bottom:

•Overall our students’ scores reflect a significant improvement in their writing performance on the 2000 MEAP in comparison to the 1998 High School Performance Test (HSPT).

- 86% of the students scored in Categories I and II on the 2000 MEAP in comparison to 77% of the students scoring in these top two categories on the 1998 HSPT.
- There was a 46% reduction in students scoring in Categories III and IV from the 1998 test to the 2000 test.
- 55% fewer students scored in the lowest category (Category IV) from the 1998 test to the 2000 test.
- Using a chi-squared statistic with a critical value of 7.815 at the .05 level, the chi-squared statistic for these results was computed to be 9.27, supporting the conclusion that our strategic interventions did result in verifiable student improvement.

They conclude, “This initiative [the Collins Writing Program] has been so successful that all three middle schools requested training in the five types of writing and have subsequently adopted this program at all three middle schools. Having our freshmen enter Dow High with a knowledge of the Five Types of Writing (see [collinseducationassociates.com](http://collinseducationassociates.com)) helps us establish and maintain a consistency of instruction. Also, two elementary schools requested in-services for their teachers, and two members of our committee spent time during elementary staff meetings in order to familiarize these teachers with the Five Types of Writing.

In addition, members of our committee have been invited to present our committee work on writing across the curriculum to other area schools.” (School Improvement Committee)

**School District 8. Haverhill, Massachusetts:** Whittier Vocational Technical High School adopted the Collins Writing Program in June of 2002 as a school-wide initiative to improve students’ writing. The goal was to raise the local MCAS scores (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment Survey) for tenth grade students from what had been a dismal 24% passing rate in 2000. After three years of implementation, the tenth grade scores spiraled to an astounding 86% passing rate. The improvement in student writing is not surprising given the wholehearted effort throughout every level of the school. The most critical elements of the Implementation Plan for Whittier, without question, can be attributed to the combination of follow-up training, consulting, modeling in shops and academic classes, folder reviews, and conducting the summer course. (Close to 40% of the entire staff have participated in the five-day summer course.)

As 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.” Building-wide focus correction areas for grades 9-12 were developed and are posted in every classroom and shop area, alongside the chart of the Collins Five Types of Writing. There is a clear expectation to write on a regular basis in all disciplines. The common language and consistent approach, along with strong administrative support, have resulted in students who are better, more thoughtful writers and instructors who are more confident in assigning and correcting their students’ writing.

### Tenth Grade MCAS Scores

Year	% Passing
2000	24%
2001	50%
2002	69%
2003	81%
2004	86%

Finally, the following letter is typical of the feedback we get:

I wanted to let you know we've had success with your writing program . . . . [Teachers] love its simplicity, its inherent sense, and its pragmatism. On the MCAS long writing sample, our average score was between 16 and 17 out of 20. Overall, we scored 41<sup>st</sup> of all the elementary schools in the state in all areas, and when you account for ties, we were 16<sup>th</sup>. We may have been the highest scoring Title I school. Your program is beneficial to every aspect of MCAS, but more importantly, it is a simple step-by-step process that will give our kids skills they can use for the rest of their lives.

Jerry Morris, Marshfield, Massachusetts

#### High Teacher Praise

Teachers love our training. Between 1986 and 2005, we have conducted 781 open-to-the-public workshops that were attended by 26,187 participants from 29 states. In these workshops, we ask the question, "Compared to other workshops you have attended, how would you rate this workshop?" We use a 1 to 10 evaluation scale, with 1 designated "not effective at all"; 5, "an average experience"; and 10, "one of the best I've attended." Our evaluations have averaged 9.2 over the past 18 years. During the five summers of 2001 to 2005 we conducted 206, three graduate credit courses attended by 3,604 teachers. Using the same ten point evaluation scale as above, the average score was 9.6.

We have conducted more than 15,000 school-based workshops that are equally well received. For example, the Grand Rapids, Michigan, school system keeps close tabs on what their teachers have to say about their in-service workshops. An 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher stated that the workshop is the "best in-service I've ever been to," and another teacher states it was "the very best in-service I've attended in 8 years!! Wow! What a dynamite presenter—look forward to other opportunities for further work." Other teachers were more specific: "My students are monolingual from Haiti. They are between 7 and 10 years old and have never been to school. . . . I believe now that I can start them on writing." These comments are indicators of the opinion of workshop attendees in general. (Grand Rapids Research, Evaluation and Planning Services)

Not only has the Collins Writing Program made it easier "to break down the barriers that prevent us from implementing writing," but it has facilitated significant, measurable improvements in writing school-wide. (Grand Rapids Research, Evaluation and Planning Services) The Uhl and Perez-Selles study at a New York City

school found that: “Integrating the Cumulative Writing Folder into and across the whole curriculum has created an atmosphere and learning environment that neither we nor they could have anticipated. At no point had we promised that the writing program would become a panacea for school transformation. But, it is having that kind of impact.”

An independent study at this same New York City school found that after about one month of using the program, “teachers wrote that students were becoming better thinkers, more enthusiastic about writing, and writing richer sentences. One teacher estimated that 95 percent of the students were more willing to try new things, able to focus their writing, expressing ideas in writing, becoming better self-editors.” Eight months later, with continued support, a “teacher who had openly declared her resistance had become one of the system’s staunchest supporters.” (Uhl)

### **Commitment to Change**

Even though many teachers have said that the Collins Writing Program workshop is “one of the few workshops in recent memory that I’ve been to that I thought I could implement in my room tomorrow,” schools should not base a decision on whether or not a program works solely on teachers’ opinions of the workshop. A writing program, or any program in education is, in a sense, like a piece of exercise equipment. No matter how great a piece of exercise equipment looks, no matter how many real-life accounts you hear, the product won’t work well unless it is used correctly and consistently on a long-term basis. A teacher at a New York City school sums up this perspective: “This program is good. It can make a difference in the teacher’s work, as well as the students’, if the teachers use it.”

Carefully designed pre–post controlled group studies confirm the program’s impact on student writing skills and scores, but we have had clients whose students’ scores have not improved, and we believe we know why: weak or inconsistent implementation.

We have no problem explaining our program or getting acceptance of our program, but getting consistent long-term (one year and more) implementation is our biggest hurdle. When we show positive results, they are from schools that have implemented the program over time, with support in the form of follow-up technical assistance and in-class modeling. We find that most schools need three to six days of training and assistance over a one- or two-year period. Without long-term commitment, training, and support, positive results cannot be guaranteed.

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