

Collins Writing Program Implementation Profile

South Elementary School
Holbrook, MA

In the last six years, South Elementary School has experienced significant improvement in its Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) scores in language arts, math, and science. Principal Julie Hamilton (now assistant superintendent) began by focusing the school's efforts on improving writing with the Collins Writing Program.

Background

The South Elementary School is located in a suburb south of Boston, Massachusetts. It serves 322 students in grades four through six, of which 42% are low income and 18% are learning disabled.

In 2007, South Elementary School was struggling to improve instruction and student learning, especially in the fourth grade. According to MCAS test results, only 46% of fourth graders were proficient or advanced in language arts. In mathematics, only 29% of students were proficient or advanced. Fifth grade scores were not much better: Only 55% were proficient in ELA, 51% in math, and 31% in science.

Principal Julie Hamilton decided to focus her efforts on writing in the fourth grade. She felt that if she could build success in writing, the results would have a ripple effect across other subjects and later grades. "When we brought in the Collins Writing Program, we knew what we wanted—to infuse our curriculum with writing, to get students engaged, and to promote more critical thinking. At the same time, we wanted to find a sustainable way to provide students meaningful feedback with a clear focus."

The Training

In the fall of 2008, Bill Atwood, a Collins Associate, gave a general introduction to the Collins Writing Program to the whole staff. The goal was to show teachers how to use the Five Types of Writing to build fluency, stamina, and higher-order thinking. Atwood helped the staff create lessons that would build the critical skills needed for student success. He modeled how to develop quick writing prompts to check for understanding and how to design more structured assignments to push students to use evidence to support their ideas and to show their work in math.

In Massachusetts, fourth graders must write a multi-paragraph essay as part of the MCAS test. This essay is evaluated on a 12-point scale for idea development and an 8-point scale for conventions. In 2007, the school was 4% below the state average on idea development and 1% below average on writing conventions. After the introduction to Collins, Atwood worked closely with an excellent team of fourth grade teachers to improve essay writing. In the first year, he came to the school six times to examine student work, model lessons in classrooms, and coach teachers. Showing teachers how to build assignments provided a clear focus for students to improve their writing. Students

worked on adding sensory description to their narratives and text-based evidence to opinion writing.

From 2009 to 2012, Atwood continued to support the fourth grade but also began working with fifth-grade teachers to use writing across the curriculum. Training amounted to six to eight days per year, with some time spent checking in with the fourth grade and refining and strengthening efforts from 2008. During this phase, he modeled in classrooms, coached and observed, met with teams to review student work, and planned interim assessments to check on projects. Through writing, math and science teachers helped deepen student understanding and taught students to show their thinking, especially on open-response prompts. They worked to increase students’ background knowledge by focusing on a group of essential vocabulary words and critical graphics. As a result, students were able to write more about the water cycle or a point on a number line.

Grade 4 and Grade 5 Results

Fourth Grade Long Composition

Results were dramatic. Beginning in 2008, South Elementary School made steady and sustained progress on the MCAS long composition. Essays were longer, clearer, and more detailed. Students learned how to craft an intriguing lead and a powerful conclusion. They learned how to include relevant details, quotations and descriptions and to edit for mechanical mistakes. Scores on the long composition increased—especially compared to the state average. By 2013, Holbrook equaled or outperformed affluent, highly esteemed districts like Brookline and Newton, Massachusetts.

South School and Statewide Fourth Grade Long Composition Scores, 2007-2013

Year	Idea Dev. Score, South	Idea Dev. Score, State	Difference from State Average (%)	Conventions Score, South	Conventions Score, State	Difference from State Average (%)
2007	7.05	7.34	-3.9	6.57	6.64	-1.0
2008	7.19	7.20	0.0	6.91	6.86	0.7
2009	6.49	6.30	3.0	6.30	6.16	2.2
2010	7.48	7.11	5.2	7.01	6.71	5.8
2011	7.19	6.50	10.6	6.94	6.30	10.1
2012	7.53	6.81	10.5	6.77	6.42	5.4
2013	7.20	6.60	9.1	6.88	6.32	9.0

As the results came in, the staff at South School was encouraged by their efforts and became willing to try new strategies that would help improve other areas of instruction. Students began to write more, learn more, and feel empowered by their efforts. Hamilton recounts, “We have a great staff; we just needed a clear direction with focused strategies. Collins gave us a way to evaluate writing, set goals, and move forward. After each training, the staff was so enthusiastic they would go back to their room and get started right away. The Collins Writing Program was easy to follow and the results speak for themselves. Collins wasn’t the only reason for our success, but it was one important part.”

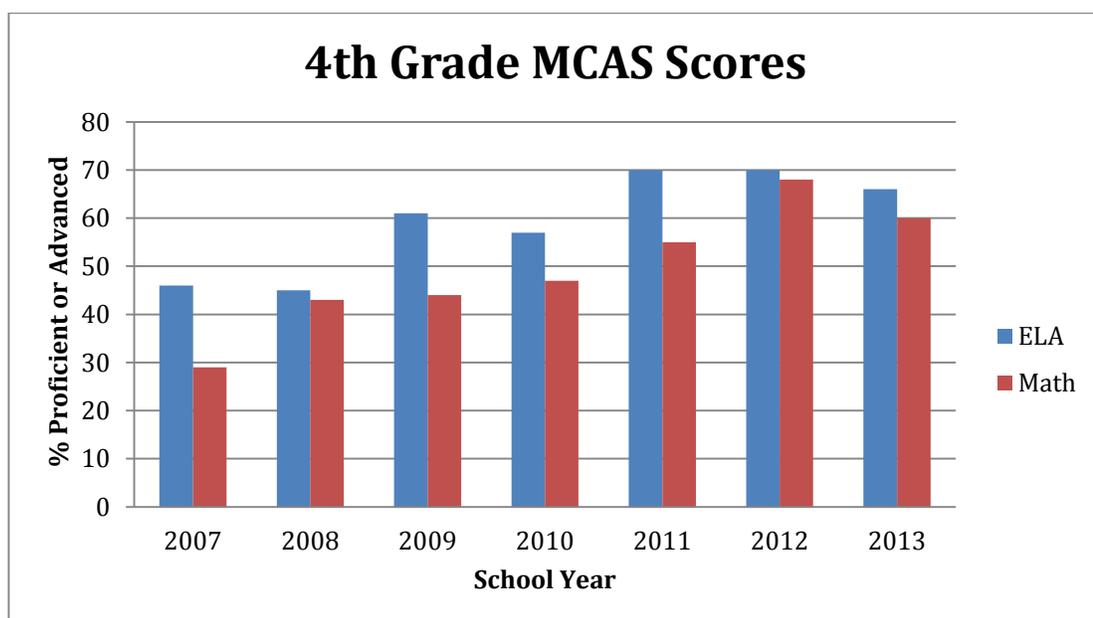
Veteran fourth-grade teacher Mallory Dumont recalls, “The Collins training made a profound impact on my students’ writing by providing me with an assortment of new strategies and innovative ideas for teaching. All students, even those who were reluctant writers at first, loved the assignments and worked hard to improve their skills. We have a high number of struggling students who come into fourth grade with writing and reading skills well below grade level. The Collins program helped us by giving structured assignments that target specific areas of weakness. By the end of the school year, students showed tremendous growth in writing, and many students developed a new, positive attitude thanks to all the creative mini-lessons that were provided.”

Fourth Grade ELA Test and Math Test

On the overall language arts test, which includes reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar, fourth grade scores improved from 46% proficiency in 2007 to 66% proficiency in 2013, a change of 43%. On the math test, students also benefitted from Collins strategies, advancing from 29% proficient or higher in 2007 to 60% proficient or higher in 2013—a 106% improvement.

Fourth Grade Overall ELA and Math MCAS Scores, 2007–2013 (%)

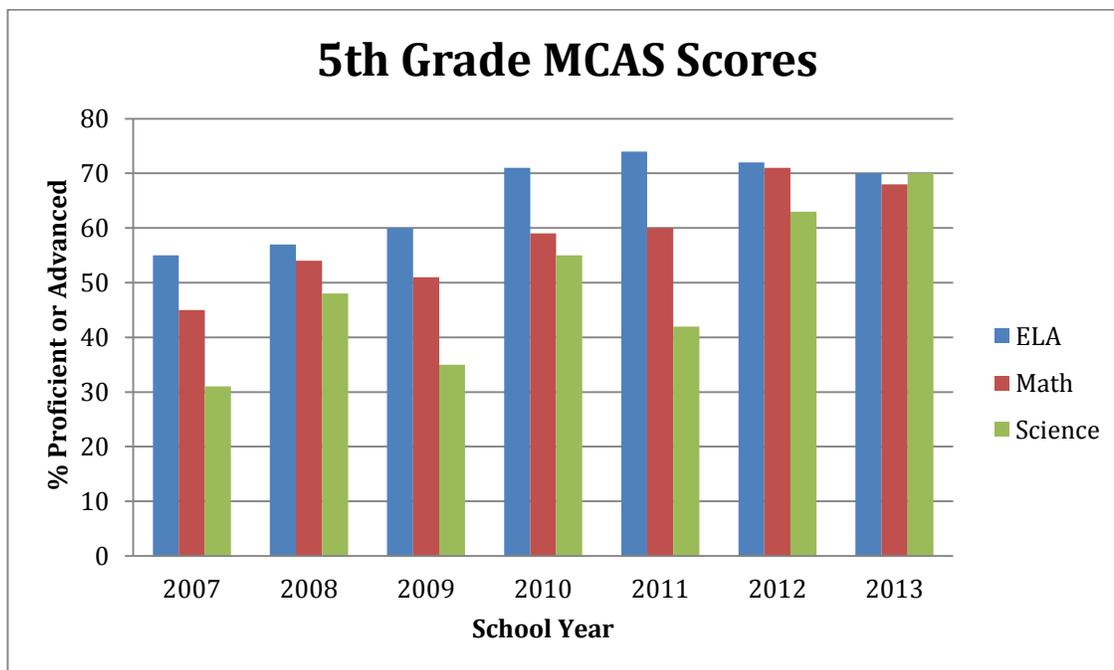
Year	ELA Proficient or Advanced	Math Proficient or Advanced	ELA Warning	Math Warning
2007	46	29	14	22
2008	45	43	13	14
2009	61	44	13	15
2010	57	47	8	11
2011	70	55	4	4
2012	70	68	7	4
2013	66	60	4	3
Score change, 2007–2013	43%	106%	-71%	-86%



Just as Hamilton predicted, the results spread to the other grades. When the Collins training focused on grade 5, the increase of scores in ELA, math, and science from 2007 to 2013 was just as encouraging.

Fifth Grade Proficient or Advanced MCAS Scores, 2007–2013 (%)

Year	ELA Proficient or Advanced	Math Proficient or Advanced	Science Proficient or Advanced
2007	55	51	31
2008	61	54	48
2009	51	52	35
2010	75	59	55
2011	72	59	42
2012	74	67	63
2013	69	69	70
Score change, 2007–2013	25%	35%	126%



The Bottom Line

South Elementary School began with a clear focus: improve writing skills in grade four. It had a specific target: use the long composition to measure student improvement. And it had a plan: improve classroom instruction by implementing the Collins Writing Program over eight sessions in the first year. Staff applied this clear focus, specific target, and improvement plan across grades to spread results throughout the school. Today, South School is a Level 1 school, the highest performing category in Massachusetts. They have twice received a commendation award from the Commissioner of Education which is presented to only 64 schools out of 1,587 in the state.

South School Proficient or Advanced MCAS Scores, 2007–2013 (%)

Year	ELA Proficient or Advanced	Math Proficient or Advanced	Science Proficient or Advanced
2007	55	45	31
2008	57	54	48
2009	60	51	35
2010	71	59	55
2011	74	60	42
2012	72	71	63
2013	70	68	70
Score change, 2007–2013	27%	51%	125%

